



Narrating History: Understanding China’s Earliest Narratives in *Zuo Zhuan*¹

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Abstract

In sharp comparison to the extensive research on Ruist Canon as the Four Books, studies on Chinese historical narratives remains a rarefaction. Interpreting Confucius’ only historical writing — the Spring and Autumn Annals with vivid and literary touches, *Zuo Zhuan*, or *Tso Chuan*, is one of the most important sources for understanding the history of the Spring and Autumn Period (Chunqiu), among the earliest Chinese work of narrative history, covering the period from 722 BC to 468 BC. With a variety of perspectives ranging from narratology to translation studies, this paper discourses the intricacies of Chinese narrative traditions in hope of promoting the understanding of Chinese historical texts and their translation, highlighting how different translation versions imitates the original writings and represent them into new narratives.

Key words: Narratology; History; Translation; *Zuo Zhuan*; the Spring and Autumn Annals

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INTRODUCTION

The *Five Classics* (Wu Jing), namely the *Book of Songs* (Shijing), the *Book of History* (Shujing), *Book of Changes* (Yijing), the *Book of Rites* (Liji) and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (Chunqiu) and the *Four Books*, referring to the *Great Learning* (Daxue), the *Doctrine of the Mean* (Zhongyong), the *Analects* (Lunyu) and the *Works of Mencius* (Mengzi), are collectively considered the Confucian canon and used by China’s Imperial Academy for recruiting officials over thousands of years. Among the sacred writings, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the official chronicle of the state of Lu, recording the history from 722 to 481 BC, is the earliest surviving historical text to be arranged in annals form. Believed to be edited by Confucius, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is concise and brief with narratives that is too subtle to be informative. In order to clarify the Sage’s idea, *Zuo Zhuan* (also called the *Zuo Commentary*) came into being. It consists of two interwoven texts the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and a vast web of narratives and speeches that add context and interpretation to the *Annals*.

Drawing upon narratology, the theorizing of narratives thrives in the Western countries, this paper is making an attempt to analyze Chinese oldest historical narratives from a western perspective so as to explore new approaches to better understand and promote Chinese historical and cultural traditions.

NARRATOLOGY—WESTERN STUDY AND MODERN TRENDS

It is believed that theoretical examination of narration could be traced back to the year 1883 when Germany-speaking scholars began to research novels from the

¹ *Zuo Zhuan*, also known as *Tso Chuan* or *Chunqiu Zuo Zhuan*, sometimes translated as the *Chronicle of Zuo* or the *Commentary of Zuo* or *Tso*. For the convenience of writing, this paper adapts *Zuo Zhuan* considering its prevalence in sinology and well reception in China.

perspective of narratives². However, it is in the early twentieth century that major contribution has been infused into a systematic construction of narrative theories and reached its first spike with the effort of Percy Lubbock (1879-1965) (*The Craft of Fiction*, 1921), E. M. Forster (1879-1970) (*Aspects of the Novel*, 1927), Vladimir Propp (1895-1970) (*Morphology of the Folktale*, 1928), Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 1930-1932) and Henry James (1843-1916) (*The Art of Novel*, 1934). Among them, the influence of Vladimir Propp and Mikhail Bakhtin barely could not be overstressed given that the former with his *Morphology of the Folktale* presents a vista allowing all narratives³ to be boiled down to a limited number of “basic forms” and “components”, and the later catalyzes the process of liberating narrative out of literature, in particular, novel theory through his assertion of rejecting the overdose emphasis on literary techniques and the shortfall allowance on social and political factors.

Even though neither of them opens up the epoch regarded today as classical narratology, the significance their work turns out, for their structuralist successors, to be far-reaching⁴. Apart from the thirty-one functions, Propp's research methodology also implies the possibilities of “text grammar”, which by transposing the textual surface—sentences and paragraphs to deep-structural “elements” and by so doing, making the extension of “generative grammar” feasible to narrative domain. Therefore, Claude Bremond (1929 -) and Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917-1992), both interested in testing Propp's theories in tales of greater length and seeking for “underlined structure” in literary work, revise Propp's “function” model into “actant” model and apply it to the study of myth, jokes sagas and folklores; Tzvetan Todorov (1939-), by experimenting with *The Decameron* (1350) proposes “narrative syntax” that simplify stories of complicated nature to sentences that constructed abiding by hidden but concrete syntax; It echoes Roland Barthes' (1915-1989) endeavor, who examines the correspondence between the structures of narrative with that of a sentence and split a work into three hierarchical levels: “functions”, “actions” and “narrative” (Barthes, 1988, p.20) . Meanwhile,

divergence begin to emerge in narrative research when another narratological school of scholars, known as the “Chicago critics”, perfect and continue the tradition of Lubbock, Friedman and James. Represented by Northrop Frye (1912-1991) and Wayne Booth (1921-2005), they advocate the “self-containedness” and the pure “rhetorical representation” of novels, claiming that narratives in novels are elementally rhetorical considering that it lodges an audience of readers in a staged communication with an implied author and secures the rhetorical effect would not manifest itself to others apart from the author, the narrator and readers (Booth, 1961, p.399).

However, it is after Gerard Genette (1930-) that classical narratology is at its pinnacle. Genette, by discriminatingly assimilating the insights of previous researchers, mainly structuralists, plays a decisive role in integrating the terminological framework of narrative theories and makes path-breaking contribution to applying narrative theories to the study of modern literatures. However, he manages to differentiate himself from narratologists of both linguistic and rhetorical approach, by focusing entirely on the narrative interpretation of novels, not necessarily realistic (as what Frye and Booth do) or of folk tales nature. His work—*Narrative Discourse* (1979) (revised in 1982 as the second edition) dwells mainly on Marcel Proust's (1871-1922) writing (particularly *Remembrance of Things Past*). His taxonomy of narrative as well as his focalization on perspectives find himself many followers including Gerald Prince (1942 -), Seymour Chatman (1928-), Dorrit Cohn (1931-) and Susan Lanser (1944-).

Standing on the threshold of the 1980s', the interdisciplinary and international character of narrative theories became evident: on one hand, Robert Scholes (1941-) precede structuralist thought and publish lucid collections on classical narratologies; James Phelan (1951-) and Peter Rabinowitz (1944-) continue to sail along the course charted by Booth; on the other hand, new models from the most diverse theoretical trends are adapted, synthesizing new focuses and perspectives from psychoanalytical approach embraced by Peter Brooks (1946-) and Ross Chambers (1944-), to feminist approach applied by Andy Warhol (1928-1987) and Susan Lanser and discourse-critical model preferred by Steve Cohan (1955-) and Linda M. Shires (1950-).

Encountering with the infinite possibilities that narrative may lead to, scholars and philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) turn their eyes to issues as how narratives, personal and collective, shape the national history. Looking back into historical and temporality distance, Ricoeur in his *Time and Narrative* (1984), addresses the capacity of narratives, which is at once very recent since the study of that thrives only in the twenties and thirties, yet also quite ancient, in that it has been coexisting with the history of human beings for thousands

² Among them, Friedrich Spielhagen (1829-1911) and Otto Ludwig (1813-1865) are two exemplary figures who dealt mainly with narrative patterns in Germany novels.

³ Propp primarily bases his research on Russian folklore. Propp's model, according to his analysis, consists of thirty-one “functions”. Among other things, there are heroes, magic helpers, antagonists and so on so forth.

⁴ Though they are never so named, Propp and Bakhtin's research on narratives has a sensible hue of Russian formalism. Influenced by Russian formalists including Victor Scklovsky (1852-1913) (“*Art as Technique*”, 1917), Boris Tomashevsky (1868-1936) (“*Thematics*”, 1925) and Boris Eichenbaum (1886-1959) (“*The Theory of the Formal Method*”, 1927), whose writing sets a course for literary studies that led to Prague structuralism, French semiotics, and postmodern poetics.

of years. There is no other text than the Chinese historical recording *Zuo Zhuan* that would provide the prime case for research.

THE NATURE OF ZUO ZHUAN—A NARRATIVE ACCOUNT OF THE SPRING AND AUTUMN ANNALS

Being one of the most important sources for understanding the history of the spring and Autumn Period (Chunqiu), *Zuo Zhuan* is among the earliest Chinese work of narrative history, covering the period from 722 BC to 468 BC. It is traditionally attributed to Zuo Qiuming⁵, as a commentary to the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (Chunqiu). In addition to preserving an invaluable picture of an era that would otherwise be largely unknown, the *Zuo Zhuan* is important in the history of Chinese: it has played a key role in shaping the patterns and motifs that were to characterize later work of historical literature. It is even more valuable as a study case given it was initially compiled to bring out the profound yet subtle meanings⁶ of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Our hypothesis may find the prime demonstration in *Zuo Zhuan*, which aims to interpret historical discourses narratively.

The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is, basically, the court chronicle of the Zhou Dynasty state of Lu, from 722 BC to 481 BC. It is brief, not informative, and inconsistent in its choice of events to note. Years are arranged according to the reigns of the various Dukes of Lu. The chronicle begins in the first year of the reign of Duke Yin, and ends abruptly in the fourteenth year of the reign of Duke Ai. At a very early date, prior to the composition of the *Mencius*, 300 BC, the tradition arose that the *Annals* had at some time fallen into the hands of Confucius who modestly edited it to bring out its “meaning.” An understanding of the editorial process, it was claimed, could reveal to readers the most profound wisdom pertaining to government and history. Mencius said that when Confucius edited the *Annals*, “corrupt ministers and lawless sons were in terror”⁷.

An oral commentary tradition arose which made every effort to reveal the subtle editorial process which

Confucius had used, and extract from the chronicles the Sage’s message. Two major branched of the tradition developed, the commentary tradition of “Guliang” (*Guliang Zhuan*) and that of “Gongyang.” (*Gongyang Zhuan*) —Of the two—which in their written forms (recorded during the Former Han Dynasty, 202 BC-9 AD) are very much alike. A third commentary, *Zuo Zhuan*, did not try to tease ethical meanings out of the text of the chronicle, but simply expanded, at great length, upon the history behind the *Annals*⁸.

Therefore, as a commentary to the *Annals*, *Zuo Zhuan* functions as an narrative interpretation of Confucius’ words, and creatively digs out, selects and then integrate historical events that are obscured in the *Annals*, and in this respect, unfold the meaning through narratives. It could be observed that the narratives in *Zuo Zhuan* is unique not only when compared to the historical discourses of the Western world, but among its counterparts in China.

NARRATIVE FEATURES OF ZUO ZHUAN

Compared to the vast amount of textual and lexical scholarship on *Zuo Zhuan*, there has been little analysis of the narratives it contains. What is even more sobbing is the fact that among the few who values the narratives in *Zuo Zhuan*, scarcely have them notice their contribution to disclosing the “meaning” and imitates history since many find those narratives often difficult to follow and the point of specific passages hard to determine. However, as one of the central concerns of this paper, we would like to highlight the narratives in *Zuo Zhuan* and discuss the organization and meaning of *Zuo Zhuan* narratives.

Liu Zhiji (661-721), one of the most well established Chinese literary and historical critics, is among those who appreciate *Zuo Zhuan* for its narratives. In his work *Shi Tong* (*Understanding History*), which is the first Chinese language work on historiography and describes the general pattern of the past official dynastic historiography on structure, method, order of arrangement, sequence, caption and commentary back to the Pre-Qin Era (before 221 BC), he spares two chapters on discussing narratives in *Zuo Zhuan*. Amazed by the elegance and vividness of its narration, he concludes that:

When the *Zuo Zhuan* narrates events, if it is describing an army on the move, then rosters and written documents seem to crowd our vision and confused clamor and hubbub well up all around us...When it records a glorious victory, the captives and spoils are listed in detail; when it speaks of a disastrous rout, the fleeing remnants stream across the scene. When it portrays oaths and alliances, its words overflow with noble spirit; when it touches on treachery and bad faith, we can see where the

⁵ Disputes never settle as it comes to the composer of *Zuo Zhuan*: Qian Mu, a Chinese historian leads the argument believing that Confucian himself compiles it and supports it with abundant evidences. See Qian Mu (钱穆), *History of Chinese Historiography*. Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1996.

⁶ Liu Xie thinks highly of Zuo’s endeavor of disclosing the subtle “meaning” and presenting them in historical narratives. See Liu Xie (刘勰), *Wenxi Diaolong*, Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1992.

⁷ Mencius stresses the moral power contained in the *Annals* and states that Confucian concerns over the moral perversity and compiles the *Annals* to purify people’s minds. See Mencius, *The Work of Mencius*. (James Legge Trans.). Shanghai: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2011.

⁸ By later Han times, it had been accepted into the Confucian canon, where it joined the *Guliang* and *Gongyang* commentaries to make up the so called “*The three commentaries*” on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

falsity and deception lies. When it recounts acts of gratitude and bounty, it is as warm as the spring sun; when it chronicles sternness or severity, there's a chill like autumn frost. Speaking of states that flourish, its words take on a boundless flavor of fulfillment; listing the nations that have perished, its tune is melancholy with regret... Few are the writings that can match its reputation. Past and present, it stands in a class apart.

(Liu, 1987, p.14)

The narratives are so intriguing that it attracted Liu's full attention when he was quite young. Though he could not understand the *Book of History (Shang Shu)*, the moral implications of *Zuo Zhuan* naturally came to him. Virtually, the Chinese have cherished the *Zuo chuan* and elevated it to a place among the Confucian Classics first of all because of its narratives throw light upon life and times of Confucius and the society that gave birth to the Sage and his ideals, and upon *the Spring and Autumn Annals*, the work that he is believed to have compiled. And in a broader sense, *Zuo Zhuan* is prized for it preserved a truthful account of an important era of the past, albeit a dark and disordered one. If the other Classics are largely normative in nature, depicting men and women as they ought to be, the *Zuo Zhuan* reveals them as they actually are, or were in one period of history. In this sense, its value has traditionally been thought to be chiefly cautionary.

Nevertheless, it is also worth mentioning that those narratives, generally praised as "depicting men and women as they ought to be" (Karlgrén, 1926, p.44), are by no means "truthful reflection" of the events occurred in *the Annals*. Here, we do assume that *Zuo Zhuan* is history and that its account of the past is not a complete fabrication, however much it may have been influenced by aesthetic and didactic considerations, and, what's more important, creative imaginations. Chinese scholar Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998) once doubts the verisimilitude of dialogs in *Zuo Zhuan*, asking that "how those private conversations could be maintained so well even if there were neither recording machines nor shorthand at the time when *Zuo Zhuan* was compiled?" (ibid, 1977, p.164) He then holds that those dialogues are imitated by the author by imagining the original circumstances, restoring the entangled interpersonal relationship and projecting himself into the plot that has been distanced by time. Therefore, we may see that the initiative of compiling *Zuo Zhuan* indicates its narrative features, the process of compiling meshes perfectly with our hypothesis on eventalization and emplotment and the result is the internalization of the events and the perception of its cardinal principle of righteous.

THE TRANSLATION OF ZUO ZHUAN

Thanks to the translation of James Legge (1815-1897), the Scottish missionary sinologist and American translator Burton Watson (1925-2017), *Zuo Zhuan* receives the

attention of Western readers. Both fully appreciating the literary value and historic significance of *Zuo Zhuan*, James Legge and Burton Watson adopt distinctively different approaches in dealing with the narratives. Taking Confucius' *The Analects* as the starting point of his endeavour of translating Chinese Classics, James Legge regards *Zuo Zhuan* strictly as an explanatory text of *the Annals* and thus makes every effort to reveal the morality implied in *the Annals*. Yet, much to his disappointment, Legge found that the work of the Master Kong is made up of the "briefest possible notices of the events of the time" and Confucius made little attempt to "exhibit the connexion between them", or offer "any expression of opinion as to the moral character which attaches to many of them" (Legge, 1872, p.39). He thus challenges the value of *the Annals*, saying that:

The paragraphs are always brief. Each one is designed to commemorate a fact; but whether that fact be a display of virtue calculated to command our admiration, or a deed of atrocity fitted to awaken our disgust, it can hardly be said that there is anything in the language to convey to us the shadow of an idea of the author's feeling about it.

(Legge, 1872, p40)

Though admits the "praise-and-censure" theory of Confucius may be different from the West historians, Legge is still committed to his perspective that a good history should be compiled with facts that "display virtue" and "command admiration", or deeds of atrocity that "fitted to awaken our disgust" (Legge, 1872, p.3). And it is for that reason that Legge starts to cast his eyes to *Zuo Zhuan* for its multitude of details and the vividness of dialogues. Holding tight to the belief that the translation should not "insist on one term so as to do violence to a sentence, nor on a sentence so as to do violence to the general scope, try with your thoughts to meet that scope and then we shall apprehend it" (Legge, 1872, p.1), Legge has contributed his more than 1500 pages of legacy along with his more than 600 comments and cultural notes to the world cultural heritage. Though more than 100 years have passed, his translation of *Zuo Zhuan* is still frequented quoted worldwide, providing a solid source for studies on Chinese history and historiography.

Compared with Legge's voluminous work, Burton Watson turns to a "lighter" and modern translation approach: Unlike the "thick translation" adopted by Legge, Burton decides that for ordinary Western readers in short of basic knowledge of China back to Chunqiu Period, the translation should be based on the best-known narratives covering the most significant themes including battles (as those at Hanyuan, Chengpu, Pi, An, and Yenling), diplomatic maneuvering, and power wrestling in the court (as in Duke of Ai, Duke of Yin and Shen sheng, the royal prince of Ch'in), and proper editing should be applied so as to knitting relevant events and figures that scattered in year-by-year entries of into one chapter. Therefore, instead of a word by word translation

of the original text, Watson presents the readers with a condensed version of *Zuo Zhuan* using everyday language and casual style which cater to the need of the modern eyes. In his translation, each chapter dedicates to one prominent theme that underpinning Chinese culture: be it the filial piety demonstrated in Chapter One, the propriety in Chapter Two and Three or the responsibilities of rulership in Chapter Five. Apart from the creative selection and integration of rigid historical facts which are later delicately weaved into intriguing plots, Watson also undertakes to crystallize the morality implied by adding in each chapter introduction and conclusions illustrating the historical and cultural background along with comments of scholars and notes of his own. For instance, while narrating the historical episode of “Duke Ling of Chin did not chün”(Duke Ling of Chin is not a proper ruler) dating back to 607 BC, Watson starts the chapter by citing the words of Confucius:

Confucius, in a famous pronouncement in Analects XII, ii, declared that good government prevailed when “the ruler is a ruler, the minister a minister, the father a father, the son a son”. The implication of course is that if a person ceases to fulfill the duties required of his particular position in society, he can no longer expect others to treat him as though he occupied that position.

(Watson, 1989, p.119)

By so doing, Watson provides the readers with a perspective, not from personal understanding but from the Sage himself, from which the ethical guidance subtly indicated in following narration became accessible. Yet, not satisfied with merely conveying the message of the author, Watson, as a cross-cultural narrator and translator, invites the readers over, with his views, to engage in discussions as the role of historians. In the same chapter, he ends the narratives by asking the whether historians, as recorders of events at court, compilers of the records, witnesses of history, might be entitled to sacrifice the truth of history for making a moral point. Owing to his endeavor, the dry and cold events happened in a remote time and place would be brought back to life, enabling the Chinese traditional virtues and values meet the western minds.

CONCLUSION

Experience is meaningful and human behavior is generated from and informed by this meaningfulness. And narratives, personal or historical, by recording life experiences, accumulate cultural legacies and human wisdom. Although have taken different paths in the compilation and study of narratives, the East and West both acknowledge the value of narratives and drew heavily on them for recording history. Given that currently lexical, syntactical, rhetorical and contextual studies on Chinese classics abound, western narratology might have offered a brand new methodology for promoting Chinese

core values within and beyond China. It is hoped that the narrative analysis of *Zuo Zhuan* could make an attempt to explore the infinite possibilities on the study of Chinese history, which creates foundation for cross cultural understanding.

History of any nation, pertaining any time is meant to be shared by people of different communities, from which lessons could always be learned. Thus the translation of history is highly indispensable. The reexamine of the nature and features of Chinese narrative history sheds new light on its translation: once regarded more as a cross cultural “stories telling” process than word by word rendering experience, the translation of historical narratives may survive the great disparity between the author and the target readers and stand a chance of flourishing in the “foreign soil”. The amalgamation of translation and narrative, as a result, might also envisage a promising scenario, in which to interpret, would veritable purport to render what is alien, foreign, or distant in terms of our historically inherited pre-understanding, not through racking our brain to pin down equivalences of any kinds or differentiating “false friends”, but via taking translation as a process of recounting historical or fictional events that once happened or were fabricated in cultural distance; and only by so doing, history could be once again obtain its dynamics and becomes stories that told of people, by people, for people. These “recounted” stories would no longer point to a destined ending, target a designated group of audience; instead, they would beckon cultures of all origins, and be submitted to various individual interpretations.

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