

## Zhuangzi – prototypes of fiction and (proto)principles of Chinese novels

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*This paper investigates Zhuangzi as a proto-fictional frameworks that anticipates the formal, rhetorical, and epistemological principles of xiaoshuo and, implicitly, of the Chinese novel. By situating Zhuangzi's philosophical prose within the diachronic evolution of Chinese narrative forms, the study argues that fiction in China emerges not solely from oral vernacular traditions, but also from a literary, polemical, and iconoclastic discourse that relativizes Confucian axiology. Through irony, paradox, parable, and fictional dialogue, Zhuangzi articulates a weak, plural, and self-reflexive mode of thinking that destabilizes canonical hierarchies and legitimizes narrative ambiguity. The paper further demonstrates how these proto-fictional strategies are perpetuated in classical gudian xiaoshuo and reconfigured in modern and post-Maoist fiction. Ultimately, the analysis proposes a non-teleological genealogy of the Chinese novel, grounded in processes of metamorphosis, rewriting, and discursive negotiation rather than rupture alone.*

Keywords: *Zhuangzi, xiaoshuo, Chinese fiction, genre theory*

### 1. Introduction

Boris Tomaşevski's view on the dynamics of literary genres allows us to observe, at the level of *xiaoshuo*, a history similar to that forms that have become canonized through the stylization of specific genre markers. Therefore, *xiaoshuo* is a structure that progressively acquires the autonomous value of a protean literary genre, located at the convergence of the poetic, epic, dramatic, philosophical, historiographical, and burlesque.

Below, I will attempt to show that the formal tools that facilitated the articulation of *xiaoshuo* into an autonomous literary genre can be identified in Zhuangzi's philosophical, reflexive-critical consciousness, that the indicators of a hybrid form, defined as marginal and non-literary, originate in a type of high discourse, ironic towards Confucianism, which spread in popular and oral literature

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and gradually matured into a mature form – which, in turn, was viewed with suspicion until the dawn of modernity.

Chinese fiction<sup>2</sup> emerged as an anti-genre in relation to the institutionally imposed *nomos*<sup>3</sup>, *wenxue* 文学, but also as an anti-discourse that called into question the hierarchies of the literary canon, being perceived “since time immemorial as a disruptive force for the literary institution”<sup>4</sup>. From an axiological point of view, the ideological structures of Chinese culture are stratified, proposing a rigid hierarchy of discourses. In this context, Confucian classics and official dynastic historiographies have outlined the general frameworks and principles of the literary system. In order to highlight this relationship more clearly, it is necessary to re-examine Zhuangzi's text within the diachronic development of *xiaoshuo* as a genre and iconoclastic manifestation.

The intellectual climate at the end of the 4th century BC and the beginning of the 3rd century BC changed in Chinese cultural space. The refinement of literature is due to an emancipation of discursive logic, which took shape during the Warring States Period (475-221 BC). Like ordinary, colloquial language, literary-cultured, discursive-rhetorical language can only be understood in the perspective of an interactive dynamic with history, more precisely, contextualization is the background of any type of hermeneutic or epistemological discourse, since any type of language is in a state of continuous evolution, responding to the cognitive needs of individuals at a given moment in history. We can also consider that new conceptions of the individual, their relationship with the universe, or their way of relating to the existential have transformed the way of perceiving reality and, implicitly, literary discourse.

In this specific cultural context, which facilitated the aesthetic emancipation of philosophical and literary discourse, we can identify two directions, both characteristic of one meaning of *xiaoshuo*, as a genre and as an iconoclastic, burlesque manifestation. The first direction consists of a movement that develops continuously and linearly in accordance with the cause-and-effect principle, and which relates to stimuli external to the literary system, most often political. Such a vision is similar to that of Boris Tomașevski in *Teoria literaturii. Poetica*. The formalist theorist defined genre as a system in which a variety of "easily combinable procedures" coexist, indicators of genre that can be related to all aspects of the literary work. The genetic relationship is dynamic (and alluvial), starting from a prototype and developing metamorphically. At the same time, it is

<sup>2</sup> I use this expression as a substitute for *xiaoshuo*.

<sup>3</sup> By *nomos*, I mean here the set of Confucian ethical-political and rhetorical norms that regulated the literary system, while *wenxue* 文学 refers to institutionally legitimized literary discourse.

<sup>4</sup> Sheldon Lu. *From Historicity to Fictionality*, p.51.

redefined according to the cultural context and the expectations of the recipients. The second direction assumes the opposite of the previous approach and is based on unpredictability, a break with official ideology, and will be defined as eccentric and heretical. The observation we propose is that Zhuangzi's philosophical text offers not only a rhetorical precedent, but also the emerging framework of Chinese fictionality, from the relativization of the rigid structures of Confucianism to the aesthetics of fable and dream, strategies that will reverberate in later narrative traditions, whether in oral storytelling and the classical novel, or in the polemical aesthetics of the May Fourth Movement and the post-Maoist novel. To be more precise, the relativization proposed by the Daoist master (Zhuang Zhou's famous parable of dreaming he is a butterfly), the logic of paradox, and the aesthetics of fabulation, in which animals, objects, or people change their ontological status, shape the subsequent way in which narrative was conceived as a permeable space between the real and the imaginary.

This proto-fictional core imposes certain genre conventions: in oral stories and in the classic novel, formal fragmentation and the symbiosis between the everyday and the supernatural, fantastical elements integrated coherently into everyday life, not as isolated occurrences but as an integral part, the polemical aesthetics of the May 4 Movement recovers the polemical relativism of Confucian dogmatism, but ends up, in its dominant post-1949 version, by prohibiting precisely that ontological and playful fluidity it had taken from Zhuangzi, replacing it with the dogma of socialist realism. Ultimately, the post-Maoist novel, from Mo Yan's naturalistic grotesque and the autofictionalization of the authorial voice, to Yan Lianke's playful relativism, to the dreamlike architecture of Yu Hua and Can Xue's novels, is built on the same fluidity between the real and the fantastic, the empirical and the oneiric.

We might invoke Tzvetan Todorov's observation that "every work modifies the set of possibilities, each new specimen changes the species" (1973, 22). However, this perspective, derived largely from formalist theory, needs to be nuanced for the Chinese context. Todorov postulates that a text enters literary history only to the extent that it produces a reformulation of the genre; however, the evolution of genres is not determined exclusively by disruptions and deviations from the horizon of expectation, but also by subtle metamorphoses, processes of rewriting and adaptation. Genealogy is not only made up of moments of crisis, but also of the revitalization of saturated phenomena, subsequently marginalized, which can become central again in another cultural context – as in the case of the post-Maoist experimental novel. The dialectic between tradition and innovation, between canonization and decanonization, is defining for the internal dynamics of any literary system, as conceptualized in Western literary theory. Each process of canonization

triggers, over time, a deconstructive reaction: a mechanism of erosion, reformulation, and reconfiguration of forms, leading to the emergence of a new set of norms. Once this canon reaches maturity and becomes exhausted through conventionalization, the dynamics of the literary system oscillate either towards a return to “order” through the reconversion of established forms, or towards a new rupture, comparable to the aesthetic revolutions of historical avant-gardes.

In this dialectical framework, *xiaoshuo* develops not only through opposition to dominant official discourses, but also through internal mechanisms of selection, sedimentation, and rewriting. The formal diachrony of the genre can be verified both at the level of production, through the conventions that the authorial instance perpetuates or contests, and at the level of reception, where the readerly instance recognizes, negotiates, or rejects these conventions. The dynamics of *xiaoshuo* therefore depend on a permanent movement between codification and transgression. This dual phenomenon, normative prestige and insurrectionary impulse, which Adrian Marino (1987) considers decisive for the birth of any new literary genre, can already be identified in embryonic form in Zhuangzi's discourse. The hybrid poetics configured here not only anticipates the subsequent autonomy of *xiaoshuo*, but also paradigmatically illustrates how genres are constituted as historical forms in a continuous oscillation between stabilization and deviation.

In genre theory, the category of genre does not represent a rigid taxonomy, but rather a dynamic set of conventions that are constantly being reformulated. However, it is not our intention to revisit or formulate a theory of literary genres, as we are aware that the term covers a vague *sui generis* reality, as Gheorghe Crăciun (1997, 109) puts it, “the result of a compromise between the uniqueness of the work and the generality of literature”. Therefore, we are more interested in the dynamic expression of this category of relationship. In the case of *xiaoshuo*, the dynamics are visible from its earliest manifestations, which combined elements of historical anecdote, philosophical discourse, moral observation, and iconoclastic, popular narrative. In its earliest manifestations, *xiaoshuo* is configured rather as an eminently hybrid literary field, in which the parable with a philosophical function, the anecdote with a moralizing intention, the satire with a social dimension, and various forms of orality coexist. This structural impurity is not accidental; it does not represent a deviation from an ideal model, but constitutes the very condition of possibility of the genre: it expresses the tension between the official Confucian discourse, which is normative and homogenizing, and the peripheral, popular, and often iconoclastic discourses. It is, in essence, a claim of pluralism and anti-dogmatism against Confucian monologism. By cultivating ambiguity, multiple perspectives, and the fictionalization of the didactic example, Zhuangzi provides

the mental architecture necessary for the emergence of “weak” (in the Vattimian sense), fluid, self-reflexive thinking.

From this point of view, we believe it is necessary to recover the distinction formulated by Mikhail Bakhtin between epos and novel in order to clarify the specificity of this dynamic. For Bakhtin, the epic belongs to an absolute, sacralized past, supported by a monological and authoritarian language; the novel, on the contrary, represents the genre of openness, of the mobile present, of the plurality of voices and of dialogism. If the epic functions through distance, solemnity, and the stability of values, the novel means relativization and polyphonic tension. It is precisely this junction, from value monologism to polyphony and permeability, that seems to describe, in a logic specific to Chinese tradition, the transition from canonical, Confucian discourse to the hybrid field of *xiaoshuo*.

Without mechanically equating the two traditions, otherwise we risk a solecism, we observe that *xiaoshuo* has the same vocation of relativization: a perpetual reference to the historical present, to the dominant episteme and ideologies, the lack of sacralized rigor, the integration of popular registers, the proliferation of perspectives, and the ability to absorb and integrate heterogeneous discourses into its structure. To the extent that the novel, in Bakhtin's view (1982, 538), constitutes a genre of becoming in conditions where “it reveals the conventionalism of forms and their language, removing some and including others in its own structure”, both in the early forms of *xiaoshuo* and in its classicized variants, we observe a form of epic in which the monological order of the canon is destabilized from within by *heteroglossia*<sup>5</sup> and the insertion of voices of otherness.

The reflexive logic of fictionalization and polyphony, recognizable since Zhuangzi, is not only a feature of the oral stories that preceded the classical Chinese novel but is perpetuated in *gudian xiaoshuo* 古典小说. In traditional literature, the moments when the intrusive narrator deliberately suspends the diegetic flow at the beginning or end of chapters are paradigmatic. These narrative

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<sup>5</sup> Heteroglossia, in Bakhtin's understanding, refers to the coexistence and productive tension between multiple social languages, stylistic registers, and ideological perspectives within the same text, which prevents the formation of a single, authoritative consciousness. It functions through the interaction between divergent voices, official and marginal, cultured and popular, serious and parodic, which are not subordinate to a monological authority, but confront each other, ironize each other, or relativize each other. Thus, heteroglossia transforms the narrative space into a dialogical field, where meaning is not imposed from above, but results from the friction between languages: moralizing discourse is disrupted by popular irony, solemn tone is cracked by playful anecdote, and the dominant perspective is negotiated through the infiltration of marginal voices. Through this polyphony, the text becomes permeable to plurality and ambiguity, establishing a relativization that destabilizes any claim to dogmatic uniformity.

intrusions function simultaneously as a mark of orality, echoing the strategies of the itinerant storyteller, and as a meta-discursive device that ironizes the moral conventions of the era, as well as the rigidity of social hierarchies. The narrator *who steps out of the story* thus becomes a commentator on his own narrative act, producing a reflexive consciousness that destabilizes the illusion of realism and exposes the mechanisms of fiction. We might take the example from *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, where at the beginning of the novel the narrator introduces the famous frame story of the Stone, the narrative voice deliberately suspends the diegesis in order to comment on the ambiguous status of fictional truth, warning the reader about the illusory nature of reality and the instability of the moral criteria that govern the world. Thus, a self-referential narrative consciousness is articulated, exposing the mechanisms of fiction and valorizing narration as a critical act, in which the symbolic order and social hierarchies are suspended.

This layered authorial structure, inherited from the traditional novel, is maintained, albeit with a new meaning, in contemporary prose. An emblematic example is provided by Mo Yan in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*, where the overlap between the authorial voice (deliberately fictionalized as an instance of a parodic and self-reflexive epos) and the voices of the diegetic narrators, Ximen Nao and Lan Jiefang, generates a narrative system built on successive developments of the act of storytelling. In the end, the true "authorial voice" is revealed in the form of the character Mo Yan himself, who explicitly takes on the role of the storyteller and addresses the reader directly, reproducing the gesture of the classic narrator who intervened in his own narrative, blurring the boundaries between fiction and fact. Thus, fiction produces a paradoxical effect: the name "Mo Yan" ("don't speak") becomes the bearer of the most vocal narrative instance, while the empirical and fictional authorial identities overlap and challenge each other. This technique, which involves a double movement of self-representation and self-irony, is not unique in Mo Yan's work. It appears, with variations in intensity, in his other novels as well, forming part of a coherent narratological project that integrates the Gudian xiaoshuo tradition into the register of the post-Maoist novel. The technique has analogies in the prose of his contemporaries, Yu Hua and Yan Lianke developing it in equally striking forms, constructing self-reflexive narrative spaces saturated with breaks in tone and expositions of narrative conventions. In contrast, in A Cheng, Jiang Rong, and Ma Jian, the same logic operates in more discreet registers. It manifests itself either through the narrator's immersions or through subtle dislocations of the authorial instance, often in the form of narrative *mise en abyme* that reactualizes the Chinese literary tradition in which the storyteller has never been completely absent.

Zhuangzi did not write xiaoshuo in the vernacular tradition, but the aesthetics of his parables, their autofictional and iconoclastic character, as well as their parodic reference to the rigid structures of Confucian discourse, reveal a fundamental aspect: the early emergence of a narrative mode that highlights the conventionalism of novelistic forms. In his anecdotes, we find the mechanism that Gérard Genette (1994) would later describe as a hypertextual relationship: parody only works through the recognition of a hypotext, in this case, Confucian discourse, which the Daoist text ironically rewrites in palimpsest. His method is reminiscent of sokrateion, the Socratic irony that has its source in the act of questioning the limits of his opponents' philosophy, although the structure is not dialogical, but rather that of a parable. The libertine character, in relation to Confucian rigors and, implicitly, the tendency to modify the officially imposed discourse, as a manifestation of Daoist principles, was in line with the trivialization of the themes of Confucius' disciples, resonating with the insurrectionary spirit that would define, centuries later, the great vernacular narrative forms.

In numerous episodes, Confucius appears either instructed by obscure masters or confronted by madmen, cripples, or ordinary people who reveal to him a truth that he himself could not formulate. These inversions are not mere doctrinal divergences but affirm the existence of an alternative way of storytelling, a non-hierarchical narrative, as Stephen Owen demonstrates in *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (1992). This type of conceptual narrative discourse, in which fiction becomes an epistemological tool and a simple form of entertainment, constitutes an early form of literary fictionality. Parable, aporetic dialogue, the (auto)fictionalization of philosophical characters, deliberate ambiguity, and fragmentism are literary elements that predate the oral tradition of xiaoshuo. Therefore, contrary to a still widespread opinion, the origin of the Chinese novel is not only orally transmitted; it is also literary. The vernacular folk tradition later adapted this stylistic matrix, taking up the discursive freedom, irony, and exemplary structure already present in the Daoist corpus. The generic mobility that Zhuangzi rhetorically instrumentalizes becomes paradigmatic in the parables in which Confucius is a protagonist. The irony practiced does not only imply the subtle trivialization of Confucian authority, but also the legitimization of another way of storytelling through a discourse that detaches itself from the moral normativity of the junzi in order to receive, almost revelatory, the spontaneity of the real, *ziran* 自然, revealed as the principle of the Daoist way of relating to the world.

Zhuangzi reflects the genesis of xiaoshuo (as a literary, marginal, and metafictional manifestation), profiled in terms of weak thinking, whose fluid, insubstantial (Gianni Vattimo) and constantly evolving subjectivity ridicules the precepts of Confucian dogma and legitimizes another type of discursivity. As

discursive potentiality, the general frameworks of Zhuangzi's fiction deny, on the one hand, rigid and clichéd social relations, and on the level of thought models, they problematize (in a negative way) the metaphysics of Confucian utopias. His rhetoric is marked by the playful tension between fidelity to traditional philosophical thinking and rebellion against the aesthetic-philosophical precepts of Confucianism. This type of rhetoric includes the histrionics of the novel, due to the fictionalization of dialogues based on "plausible fabrication." In the short parables that imagined everyday events and in the aphoristic dialogues that were intended to persuade, the principles of a new narrative typology were configured, which naturally inaugurated a new literary genre:

*Zhuangzi said to Huizi, "Confucius has been going along for sixty years, and he has changed sixty times. What at the beginning he used to call right he has ended up calling wrong. So now there's no telling whether what he calls right at the moment is not, in fact, what he called wrong during the past fifty-nine years." Huizi said, "Confucius keeps working away at it, trying to make knowledge serve him." "Oh, no—Confucius has given all that up," said Zhuangzi. "It's just that he never talks about it. Confucius said, 'We receive our talents from the Great Source, and with the spirit hidden within us, we live.' [As for you, you] sing on key, you talk by the rules, you line up 'profit' and 'righteousness' before us, but your 'likes' and 'dislikes,' your 'rights' and 'wrongs,' are merely something that command lip service from others, that's all. If you could make men pay service with their minds and never dare stand up in defiance—this would settle things for the world so they would stay settled. But let it be, let it be! As for me, what hope have I of ever catching up with Confucius?"<sup>6</sup>*

The concepts introduced in his text are not new to contemporary readers of his work, but the style in which they are presented aims at "the surprising effect of intentional ambiguity". Zhuangzi uses rhetorical and semantic devices to ridicule the rigor, rationality, and vanity of discourse that distances the individual from that primordial condition<sup>7</sup> in which man was closer to the Dao 道. The semantic

<sup>6</sup> Zhuangzi, *Călătorie liberă*, trad. Luminița Bălan, Tatiana Segal, p.264. For the current edition, I have also consulted *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (2013), translated by Burton Watson and *Zhuangzi bu zhang*, 1980.

<sup>7</sup> The essence of Zhuangzi's philosophical thinking on the relativity of discursive language and its rationality lies in the fact that it cannot tell us anything about the true nature of things. In his view, language is only an insufficient representation, an artificial and arbitrary tool through which reality is expressed. The validity of language is contested, as it represents a mystification of reality.

incongruity of the words he uses is intended to ironize the type of language found in Mengzi 孟子<sup>8</sup> and other Confucian scholars. His discursive peculiarity is irony, subtle-incisive humor is a didactic dimension of his rhetoric, and his fragments presuppose the essentialization of a dialogue in which the replies intentionally tend towards paradoxical and meaningless anecdotes. It is no coincidence that this technique will be revisited in the writings of Chan Buddhism 禪 – another philosophical discourse that will legitimise itself in contrast to Confucianism.

Confucius's fickleness is not an ad hominem argument, but an illustration of the *qiwu* 齐物 thesis, according to which statements such as "this is right/wrong" (*shi – fei* 是非) are, by the very nature of language, provisional and contradictory. Confucian authority is mocked in order to be relativized: the very authority that claims to establish moral norms and certainties becomes proof that these are nothing more than a succession of negations and contradictions. But Confucius is not only presented as the exponent of the thesis he himself fought against, but also as the eidolon of strictness, that is, of rules that contradict the free, spontaneous spirit of the individual who lives naturally according to the Dao. When Huizi defends the master, Zhuangzi is reticent, refusing to engage in polemics both because of the logic of the principle of *wuwei* 无为 inaction and because he sees the dichotomy between "truth" and "lie" as irrelevant, opposing Confucian epistemology with a relative representation, a form that Ming Dong Gu describes as kaleidoscopic and associates with Chinese narrativity. The dialogue between Huizi and Zhuangzi thus boils down to the impossibility of making rigid value judgments and restrictive categories through which we relate to reality. However, the rhetorical device used is revealing: by calmly listing Confucian ideals, Zhuangzi

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<sup>8</sup> Mencius (372-289 BC), in the intellectual context of the Warring States Period, appears as a solitary idealist who considers it his duty to defend the precepts of Confucian philosophy and to improve the way in which Confucius' philosophical discourse can be transmitted and justified. In his approach, he resorts to the discursive technique of logicians, but integrates into his own text phrases borrowed from Zhuangzi. In her interpretation of his text, Anne Cheng observes a polemical, clearly defensive tone, absent from the text attributed to Confucius, which is intended rather to persuade its readers, without the intention of instructing or educating potential disciples. A particular feature of Mencius' philosophical thought is his advocacy of the idea that the sovereign finds the source of his legitimacy in the people, who become the exponents of the expression of the heavenly mandate. However, even if at first glance this phrase may seem to contradict previous Confucian precepts, governing through the principle of humanity does not represent the suppression of social or political hierarchy. On the contrary, in his view, Ren 仁 becomes a guarantor of a pyramidal social hierarchy, with legitimacy from the people being only of a moral nature. The discursive content of his text tends to demonstrate the almost paradoxical effectiveness of the principle of humanity (Ren 仁), and his conception of human nature will become central to later Confucian thought.

articulates a panegyric in the negative. In a single rhetorical gesture, an ironic *laudatio*, the socio-political pragmatism of *rujia* 儒家 is dismantled, political efficiency implying dissociation from the natural order, Dao. Thus, the act of appreciation becomes a “stylized” condemnation in the form of excessive politeness, which is reflected in the interhuman and ritualized interactions in Confucianism.

As can be seen, the Daoist master's humor is malicious, when he does not subtly ironize Confucius, who is attributed, in the same fictionalized contexts, with Daoist doctrines as if the master of the rival school were the preacher of a doctrine in absolute disagreement with Confucianism. It suffices to observe the plausible dialogue between Zhong Ni and Yan Hui, one of his disciples:

*Yan Hui said, “I’m improving!” Confucius said, “What do you mean by that?” “I’ve forgotten benevolence and righteousness!” “That’s good. But you still haven’t got it.” Another day, the two met again, and Yan Hui said, “I’m improving!” “What do you mean by that?” “I’ve forgotten rites and music!” “That’s good. But you still haven’t got it.” Another day, the two met again, and Yan Hui said, “I’m improving!” “What do you mean by that?” “I can sit down and forget everything!” Confucius looked very startled and said, “What do you mean, sit down and forget everything?” Yan Hui said, “I smash up my limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, cast off form, do away with understanding, and make myself identical with the Great Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by sitting down and forgetting everything.” Confucius said, “If you’re identical with it, you must have no more likes! If you’ve been transformed, you must have no more constancy! So you really are a worthy man after all! With your permission, I’d like to become your follower.”<sup>9</sup>*

Confucius is a reconstructed persona who preaches, with innocent enthusiasm, a doctrine that contradicts his own axiological system. In this narrative framework, he is not the intellectual surpassed by maieutics in a philosophical discussion, but is led to accept and formulate himself the failure of his thinking, validating as a logical consequence the Daoist perspective. The iconoclasm is evident: after renouncing his own doctrine, Confucius ends up expressing his desire to become the disciple of someone else, a Daoist master, one of his disciples, or a madman. This act implies a reversal of the pedagogical hierarchy and nullifies the epistemic prestige of the master par excellence. Through such a strategy, Zhuangzi does not limit himself to

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<sup>9</sup> Zhuangzi, *op.cit.*, p.102.

criticizing Confucian discourse, but provokes an internal dislocation, causing the disarticulation of the canon to be uttered by the very paradigmatic figure of tradition.

Zhuangzi's philosophical prose is heterogeneous, both formally and compositionally, the textual corpus being a compilation of writings from distinct circles of Daoist thought, later attributed to the philosopher, rather than a unified work that imposes the foundations of a secluded, ascetic life in the spirit of the *wuwei* 无为 principle, unengaged politically or socially. This stratification produces a plurivocal discourse, in which the author's voice is often mediated or concealed through a multitude of fictional, allegorical, or polemical instances. From this perspective, Zhuangzi can be read not only as a doctrinal text, but also as a laboratory of incipient narrative forms, foreshadowing the aesthetic principles of *xiaoshuo* 小说.

A diachronic analysis of the literary forms that have perpetuated themselves throughout the history of Chinese literature, reaching maturity during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912), will prove that fiction and what would become the classic Chinese novel are closely related to the subjectivity of Buddhist narratives during the Tang dynasty (618-907). Moral exhortation narratives or supplements to historiography, fantastic tales, or anecdotes can be seen as intermediate links between the Daoist doctrinal substratum and the configuration of a (quasi) autonomous narrative system. We consider these epic forms to be intermediate links in the evolution towards the constitution of the Chinese novel, as they introduce and establish the first autonomous narrative mechanisms within initially non-literary discourses. Although predominantly oriented towards didactic, ethical, or religious functions, these forms constantly use fictionalization as a rhetorical tool, elaborating exemplary scenarios, imagined dialogues, and episodic structures that anticipate novelistic techniques. At the same time, they develop a recognizable, omniscient, evaluative, sometimes ironic narrative voice, which will become one of the defining features of the classic chapter-based novel (*zhanghui xiaoshuo* 章回小说). Through their wide circulation in urban environments, initially in oral form, these created a cultural horizon for the reception of fiction, familiarizing the public with the pleasure of storytelling, with the progression of events and a recognizable typology of characters. Clearly, they do not constitute "proto-novels," but function as a framework of possibility for the emergence of extended fiction, providing the narrative, rhetorical, and cultural tools present in the mature novel of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Another feature of this proto-narrativity is the way in which Zhuangzi conveys his ideas through other characters with whom he argues or through his own fictionalization in the third person, creating textual markers with the aim of simulating different pretexts for dialogue in order to relativize the ideas of his

ideological opponents. Within the narrative forms that will evolve into the mature structure of xiaoshuo as a literary genre, the performative act of interpreting a story in front of an audience will develop certain distinctive structures, namely that of the authorial instance intervening directly in the text, in a supposed dialogue with the reader throughout the epic narrative, with the aim of encouraging the reader to continue reading. These strategies not only fragment the discourse, but also construct a self-reflexive textuality, in which the narrative becomes a rhetorical tool, oriented towards performativity and intellectual seduction. The narrative forms that will evolve into the mature structure of xiaoshuo retain this performative character.

The tradition of oral storytelling, the cultural foundation of most early novels, is recognizable in the prologues, interludes, and authorial interventions of Ming–Qing novels, where the narrator addresses the reader directly, warns them, amuses them, or prepares them for the episodes to come. This dialogical relationship has its origins in the performances of professional storytellers, who adapted the rhythm, intensity, and register of the story to the mood of the audience.

We believe that accepting this paternity can facilitate the comparison between Chinese and Western novels, revealing a relatively common genealogy between the two systems, namely a philosophical, polemical, and hybrid genealogy:

*We possess a remarkable document that reflects the simultaneous genesis of a scientific notion and of a new artistic image in prose fiction. This document is the Socratic dialogues. Everything about this genre, which emerged toward the end of classical antiquity, is characteristic. It is significant that it appears as apomnēmoneumata, that is, as a memoir-like genre, consisting of notes based on the personal recollection of real conversations among contemporaries; it is also significant that the central figure of the genre is a man who speaks and engages in discussion. Particularly eloquent in this respect is the fusion, in the figure of Socrates as the central hero of the genre, of the popular mask of the fool who understands nothing (almost like Margites) with the features of the wisest man of the highest type (...); the result of this fusion is the ambivalent image of wise ignorance. It is also characteristic of this genre that the dialogue is narrated, canonized, and framed within a dialogized narrative. (Bakhtin 1982, 557-558)*

Although the similarity between Socratic dialogues and Zhuangzi's aphoristic narratives may only be partially equivalent, the popular character that Bakhtin

praises in Platonic texts, narratives addressed to an intellectual elite of scholars, later manifestations of xiaoshuo would have been formed eminently orally. The parodic manifestations that preceded Zhuangzi's stylistic attitude developed as a self-reflexive literary subgenre in a vernacular language, which attracted the audience through the storyteller's performance. The marginal framework, initially ironic, had the sine qua non quality of delight, which only tangentially fits into the primary epic situation proposed by Wolfgang Kayser (1979, 491): "a storyteller tells an audience something that happened," in which the point of view of the diegetic instance, contrary to Kayser's reservations about the "merging" of the narrator and the material to be told, as in the case of the lyric, takes place. For example, in the case of Wu Weiye's (1609–1671) story, *The Story of the Storyteller*, the principles of an *ars narrandi* are outlined, whose function is not only aesthetic but also ontological: they establish the conditions of possibility of the story:

*There is no great difficulty in telling a story. One must only know each character extremely well, as if he were a living person who dwells close to you and whom you know as you know yourself: what habits and quirks he has, how he speaks, how he dresses—in short, everything that can be known about a human being. Then, one must know just as well the places in which the events are set and be able to describe them in detail. Here the task becomes somewhat more complicated, for a lowland landscape must be rendered in words differently from a mountainous one. (...) The subject, however, should always be as rich and engaging as possible, full of unforeseen events, which you will strive to depict meticulously, without allowing a single detail to escape you. Your voice must be adjusted to the content of the story. When you reach the climax or when the heroes are in great peril, your speech should be swift, like a mountain stream. When you describe something or when the story flows calmly, your speech should be gentle and unhurried. Finally, you must know when to end your story, in such a way that the listeners' curiosity remains alert, so that they wish to hear you again another time. Yet this does not mean that, once the story ends, all intrigues should not be fully clarified, resolved, and explained, and that all characters should not be brought safely to shore, with their situations made clear. On the contrary. Listeners do not like to remain uncertain even about the most insignificant episode or the most marginal character you have mentioned.<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> *Frumoasa în straine verzi*, Antologie de povestiri ale cărturarilor din dinastiile Ming și Qing, 1977, pp.88-89.

The *ars narrandi* explicitly formulated by Wu Weiye is not an isolated or belated moment, developed relatively late in the diachrony of Chinese prose, but rather the confirmation of a mature narrative consciousness, already established during the Ming and Qing dynasties, whose premises can be traced back to the proto-fictional model identified in Zhuangzi. The pacing, the attention paid to the ontology of the characters, the relationship between the authorial voice, affect, and the progression of events, as well as the need for an ending that satisfies the reader's expectations indicate that storytelling is an autonomous form of knowledge. Thus, Wu Weiye's reflection is, on the one hand, a distancing from the didactic practice of Confucian prose, but it also functions as a late codification of narrative practices, referring explicitly to fictionalization as a simulation of reality, the performativity of the narrative act, and dialogue with the audience. We understand this continuity to mean that the principles of storytelling formulated in Qing represent the stabilization of a narrative mode defined from its origins by fluidity, reflexivity, and discursive freedom, traits that underpinned the subsequent dynamics of *xiaoshuo* as a discursive manifestation and literary genre.

The present analysis does not seek to reduce the genesis of *xiaoshuo* to the stylistic principles of Zhuangzi's philosophical discourse. This text, therefore, is not reduced to a simple ideological antecedent of Chinese fiction, but rather functions as a proto-fictional matrix in which the constitutive principles of Chinese fiction are articulated, at least in an embryonic state. By relativizing Confucian axiology, cultivating ambiguity, fragmenting, and fictionalizing the authorial voice, a narrative mode is configured that transforms the story from a didactic-moralizing act into a polemical instrument and an epistemological act. The narrative logic based on irony and pluriperspectivism, initially marginalized, will be recovered and augmented in the mature forms of *gudian xiaoshuo* 古典小说, where the epic discourse is systematically conceived as discontinuous, the insertion of the authorial voice is an indication of the genre, and the entire narrative world is built on the conflict between the real and the imaginary. In the classical Chinese novel, from *The Water Margin* to *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the relativization of the canonical moral order and the exposure of social conventionalism are not the result of a unified doctrinal project, conceived and assumed by an individual authorial consciousness, but the result of narrative stratifications derived from the compilation and aestheticization of the vernacular oral tradition, deeply anchored in the collective imagination. The episodic proliferation, the additive nature of the plot, the ambivalence of the characters, and the integration of marginal voices reflect the functioning of a diffuse narrative authority, in which the epos is constituted as a product of collective memory, initially negotiated between the storyteller-performer and the audience, and then between the two instances and

the final editor. Essentially, the techniques initially used to undermine the rigidity of Confucian thought in bookish philosophical discourse are transposed into the field of collective orality, where they acquire a playful function, to be later reintegrated, in an elaborate literary form, into the classical novel. Meaning is not imposed by a single instance but is constituted as the result of a perpetual tension between the bookish tradition, the collective cultural horizon of vernacular narrative practices, and the late intervention of the scholar, who acts more as a mediator, an organizer of the text in its written form, than as an author in the modern sense. In this framework, the narrative functions as a space for symbolic negotiation, in which the popular social imagination, marked by egalitarian aspirations, impulses to challenge hierarchies and rewrite the social order, is taken up, filtered and stabilised in a coherent literary form.

In this context, *xiaoshuo* asserts itself as a historical narrative form through which the process of the emergence of Chinese literature becomes (more) intelligible, rather than as a stable genre or teleological form. We do not deny its genetic dimension; on the contrary, we understand it—in its emerging stages—as a negotiation between canon and marginal popular discourses. That is why we value Zhuangzi's reading from a narratological perspective as a text with proto-novelistic potential, as this would allow us to reconceptualize the genesis of the Chinese novel not (only) as a rupture, but as a process of metamorphosis of non-canonical discourses. Thus, Zhuangzi not only anticipates specific narrative techniques, but also lays the foundations for a narrative mode of thinking that will structure Chinese fiction in the long term: the relativisation of ontological stability, the pluralisation of perspectives, and the ironisation of doctrinal authority. This narrative mode is appropriated, arranged, and expanded in the classical novel, then reconfigured in modern and contemporary prose, where it continues to function as a principle of tension between canon and deviation, between norm and possibility.

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