

COMMENT ON "A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NARRATIVE THOUGHT IN CHINESE AND WESTERN CLASSICAL LITERATURE"

Yijun Zhang

Postdoctoral Researcher. School of Theatre Film and Television, Communication
University of China, Beijing, 100024 – China.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4810-6811> |  zhangyijun2023@sina.com

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COMMENT ON “A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NARRATIVE THOUGHT IN CHINESE AND WESTERN CLASSICAL LITERATURE”

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Time and space form the fundamental framework of the human living world. In Critique of Pure Reason, Kant discusses time and space as a priori components of human perception, noting that time serves as the form through which we organize “internal experience,” while space serves as the form for organizing “external experience” (Kant 2004). The concept of time and space represents an important cognitive approach by which writers perceive the world, exerting a significant influence on creative methods and writing content (Zhang 2005). Starting from the unique perspective of spatiotemporal consciousness, Chen (2024) integrates narrative theory and comparative literary research methods to conduct a comparative analysis of the representation of space and time in Chinese and Western classical literatures, uncovering the differences and connections between the underlying cultural cognitive paradigms and the philosophical and historical roots of China and the West.

Chen (2024) point in exploring the awareness of time and space in narrative texts inevitably involves reflections on ancient myths and legends, geographical environments, and philosophical history. These factors profoundly influence people’s understanding of time and space concepts in real life, and such understandings are faithfully reflected in the literary traditions of different regions. Chen (2024) argues that the Chinese worldview is influenced by the idea of “Nature and Humans Respond to Each Other,” which typically emphasizes cycles, harmony, holism, and interconnection, perceiving nature and the universe as a large organic whole where everything is interconnected and mutually dependent. This paradigm

¹ Postdoctoral Researcher. School of Theatre Film and Television, Communication University of China, Beijing, 100024 – China. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4810-6811>. E-mail: zhangyijun2023@sina.com.

of thought has shaped a Chinese concept of time and space rich in holism and dynamism, focusing on the relationships and mutual influences between events and elements.

Western culture, based on Christian culture and ancient Greek culture, has evolved over more than two thousand years of civilization. Chen (2024) specifically mentions the “hourglass,” an image representing time, to symbolize that all things in the world are born and die within time. Unlike the traditional Chinese concept of time as cyclical, people in the context of Western culture are more acutely aware of the erosion of life caused by the passage of time. The habitual Western sequence of time expression – “day-month-year” – represents a time analysis centered around the “day.” On the other hand, as a representative of Mediterranean civilization, the spatial consciousness of island culture is one of the significant features of ancient Greek culture. Chen (2024) believes that for people living on the continent, living space is a continuous whole, thus enabling the feeling that “somewhere is the center.” In contrast, for those living on islands, the islands are isolated and disconnected from each other. This perspective fostered a sense of independence and freedom among seafaring peoples. This focus on the individual is also reflected in Western classical literature.

Under the influence of different cultural backgrounds, religions, and philosophical ideas, significant distinctions have emerged between the spatiotemporal awareness and literary styles of Chinese and Western classical literature. As Chen (2024) states, from the holistic perspective of the Chinese, literary narratives often begin at a macro level, placing individuals and events within the broader context of the universe and history to seek their position and value. In contrast, under the analytical perspective of Western culture, narratives start with details, focusing on individuals, objects, and scenes, and building causal relationships between events from the particular to the general.

Based on this, Chinese classical literature often constructs a holistic concept of time, using a broad temporal scope to encompass historical changes. Mythological novels begin with stories such as Pangu separating heaven and earth or Nuwa mending the sky, while historical novels start with accounts of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors or the successive dynasties of Xia, Shang, and Zhou (Yang 1997). The exploration of historical laws and Heaven’s Way under a holistic concept of time often creates a commentator in literary works who is detached from worldly affairs. Maintaining a certain distance from the story world within the text, this clear-sighted, independent observer comprehensively understands and grasps the developmental patterns of the story world and makes summarizing comments. This is akin to the opening line of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*: “Domains under heaven, after a long period of division, tends to unite; after a long period of union, tends to divide.”

In Chinese classical literature, the representation of relative time also reflects a broad-minded attitude towards life within the overall temporal framework. This understanding of the relativity of time enables the Chinese to “see the infinite within the finite, and return to the

finite from the infinite. Their intent is not to move forward in a linear manner, but to spiral back and forth” (Zong, 1994). Traditional Chinese cultural concepts observe the interplay of past and present within fleeting moments, transforming abstract philosophy into concrete imagery and embedding the mysterious Dao (Way) within tangible Xiang (Semblance).

The analytical concept of time in Western classical literature corresponds to the analytical thinking in Western culture. Chen (2024) points out that Western classical literary works exhibit a meticulous perception of events, often avoiding focus on long spans of historical time. This perspective is supported by numerous examples in Western classical literature, such as *The Iliad* in Homer’s Epics, which chooses to elaborate on fifty-one days within the final year of a ten-year war. At the same time, the narrative often unfolds from a single point, gradually radiating outward. The timeline becomes a logical starting point for its narrative structure.

Although the creation of classics is inseparable from the progression of time, and the linear development of time facilitates the advancement of stories, literary creation cannot exist without space. In Chinese classical literature, a grand temporal structure requires a corresponding narrative space to carry it. Chen (2024) argues that the narrative space in Chinese classical literature often intertwines several independent temporal and spatial settings. At the same time, descriptions of spatial architecture exhibit distinctive Chinese traditional characteristics. Unfortunately, Chen (2024) does not conduct a detailed analysis of spatial representations in Western classical literature but perceptively highlights the spatial turn in modern Western literary creation and theoretical research over the past two decades.

Regarding the similarities and differences in spatial consciousness between Chinese and Western classical literature, I believe that a discussion can be opened on the different relationships between characters and space in Chinese and Western classical literature. Influenced by the Chinese philosophical concept of the “Heaven and Man Are United as One” since ancient times, Chinese literature reflects a harmonious coexistence between humans and their spatial environments. The characters’ activity spaces complement their personalities and actions. In contrast, Western classical literature’s narrative strategy tends to view space either as a framework for migration or as an oppositional space to be conquered. For example, the opposition and struggle between characters and space in *Don Quixote*.

Through a comparative analysis of narrative thinking in Chinese and Western classical literature, Chen (2024) not only deepens mutual understanding and recognition among global literatures but also emphasizes the necessity of valuing local cultural characteristics when constructing indigenous literary theories. As future research incorporates the paradigm of spatial narratology, corresponding comparative studies will provide a more comprehensive perspective for exchanges between Chinese and Western classical literature.

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