

---

Patrick Hanan. *Chinese Fiction of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 285p.

GÉRALDINE SCHNEIDER  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Compared to the efflorescence of the 17th and 18th centuries or the iconoclastic new beginnings of the 20th century, Chinese literature of the 19th century has often been characterized as lacking in creativity, innovation, and experimentation. Certainly many literary historians of late imperial China have refrained from giving this period due attention because they felt that its texts did not equal the literary masterpieces of the Ming or High Qing dynasties. In this study, Patrick Hanan proves this view to be misguided and instead repositions fiction of the period in a context of intercultural transmission that engendered a new range of literary models. He achieves this by presenting to the reader eleven critical essays that examine a body of lesser-known texts within an intricate web of literary relations that ties them to the classical literary tradition as well as to novel western narratological techniques.

Hanan delineates the actual process of literary creation during the 19th century while at the same time re-examining the many sources of influence upon literary texts. He is also one of the first literary critics to place center-stage principal interventions by westerners and their effect upon the development of the Chinese novel. The problem of literary translation therefore becomes one of his most important concerns. In order to substantiate his claims that literary ingenuity did indeed flourish during the 19th century and that some of the more imaginative fictional transformations in fact overshadowed those of the 20th century, he presents penetrating textual analyses by focusing on one of the most significant elements of fiction: the narrator. Examining 19th-century Chinese novels in terms of the narrator's voice, he proves that they differ in important ways from the preceding body of fiction.

But by "voice" Hanan does not mean "perspective" in the way this term is usually used in literary analysis. Instead, he proposes to consider in each case the narrator's full identity, his relationship to the author, reader, and text as well as the specific techniques the narrator uses to interfere in the text. He differentiates between the "personalized storyteller," the "virtual author," the "minimal narrator," and the "involved author" and in each instance shows the "directing, communicative, testimonial and ideological" forces (10) that make up the narrator's discourse. When we see how the storyteller-narrator interacts constantly with his audience in, for instance, Wen Kang's *Ernü yingxiong zhuan* (*Stories of Heroes and Heroines*), it becomes clear that Wen consciously sought to foreground the work's fictional composition and simulated oral context. This, in turn, amounts to an internal critical commentary that plays a crucial role in the novel itself. It is by delineating such innovative

---

functions of the narrator in fictional texts of the period that Hanan reveals complex symmetrical structures unprecedented in the Chinese novel. Hanan's argument that 19th-century novels such as *Fengyue meng* (*Illusion of Romance*), *Hua yue ben* (*Traces of Flower and Moon*), and *Haishang hua liezhuan* (*Flowers of Shanghai*) distinguish themselves from earlier fiction by identifying the author with the narrator and by dramatizing the writing situation leads us to wonder, like he does, whether the texts' "involved author" techniques can be seen as a response to the deep cultural crisis which was becoming more and more acute as the century progressed. Though Hanan does not give a definitive answer to this hypothetical assertion, it warrants deeper consideration by future scholars.

Hanan's book presents a significant contribution to scholarship not only on late imperial Chinese literature but also in the field of descriptive translation studies. He foregrounds the motives and situations of the "composers, translators and promoters" (3) as well as the nature of the texts they produced. At the same time, his research and analyses show that many translated or adapted novels created during the 19th century were actually the work of two people: a western "speaker" who would orally narrate the gist of a western work and a Chinese "writer" who would put this oral narration into good Chinese form. As most of these partnership translations were done by religious men who had come to China from Europe to spread Christian teachings, Hanan documents the existence of the missionary novel at this time as a crucial factor in the introduction of foreign fiction into China. What scholars did not recognize prior to Hanan's analyses is that these translations were already occurring toward the beginning of the century and that the appearance of missionary novels in Chinese after 1819 allowed Chinese writers to learn and begin to use western fictional techniques long before Liang Qichao's famous call for new literature in 1902. This means that, even though many of the earliest missionary novels created by William Milne, Karl Gützlaff, James Legge, Timothy Richard, and their Chinese associates have little claim to literary merit, they present a significant moment of change and innovation in the Chinese literary realm.

Hanan also traces another rather unusual form of intervention in the development of fiction which to date may never have been fully appreciated for its importance: a fiction contest initiated by the Englishman John Fryer in Shanghai in 1895, immediately following the deeply humiliating Treaty of Shimonoseki that concluded the war with Japan. In this contest, Fryer called for fictional texts that criticized what he termed the "three evils" of Chinese culture: opium, the examination essay, and footbinding. Hanan argues that the two novels which were written to Fryer's prescription and have survived, *Xichao kuaishi* (*Delightful History of a Glorious Age*) and *Hualiu shengqing zhuan* (*Love Among the Courtesans*), may be considered as the

---

first “modern” Chinese novels since to be modern at that time meant a concern on the part of the writer with the national crisis as well as use of nontraditional methods to express that concern. He also argues that Fryer’s contest promoted the use of the novel as a means of attacking social ills, which was an idea that Liang Qichao would later use to call forth a revolution in literature.

By focusing on the genesis of the very first novel translated into Chinese, *Xinxi xiantan* (*Idle Talk Morning to Evening*), and by outlining the path of transmission that led from Edward Bulwer Lytton’s (1803-1873) original text *Night and Morning* to the translated serialization in China’s first literary journal *Yinghuan suoji* (*Trifling Notes on the World at Large*), Hanan allows us to perceive the reception of foreign cultural references as well as the diffusion of Chinese cultural references that the text presents. It is an important analysis of the dynamics of literary consciousness that leads the reader to more fully understand the importance of Wu Jianren’s (1866-1910) fictional innovations and his panoramic social critique which was for the first time presented through the mind and voice of a single individual. As Wu’s naïve hero Jia Baoyu embarks on a fantastic journey of discovery in *Xin shitouji* (*New Story of the Stone*) and as we follow the agonizing experiences of the first-person narrator in *Hen hai* (*Sea of Regret*), Hanan’s probing analysis permits us to see the dramatic changes in the narrator’s voice during this period as well as the patterns of intertextuality that informed each text during a time of dramatic change. ✱