

Chinese Notions of Fiction

In the West, studies of fiction used to focus on the novel as a literary category, but since the 1960s, most theorists have agreed that there is no such thing as the novel. It is a literary category “that has no natural or positive existence” and that “arises and rearises in different regional cultures at different times”; and it is not a literary genre with a continuous history but a succession of works “bearing family resemblances to one another.”¹ And most disconcerting to theorists who attempt to categorize it, it changes in relation to cultural and aesthetic changes. Curiously, the same can be said of Chinese *xiaoshuo*, which, as I will show, is a chameleon. In response to conceptual bewilderment, the study of fiction in the West has gone through a shift of conception from the novel to narrative. As one scholar puts it, the “death of the (realistic) novel, which attracted so much critical attention in America and France during the 1950s, coincided with the rebirth of narrative.”² The replacement of the novel by narrative was necessitated by the conceptual and critical desires to be inclusive. As Andrew Plaks aptly puts it, “[I]t is adopted as a catch-all bracket for the chain of developments moving from epic through romance to novel.”³

In the Chinese tradition, such a shift of emphasis is not necessary, for *xiaoshuo* has always been treated as narrative rather than fiction, even though the term *xushi* (narration) appeared later than *xiaoshuo*.⁴ In 1977, Plaks edited a study of Chinese narrative. The book, entitled *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays*, “attempted to provide a broad range of specialized studies covering the major works and genres of the Chinese narrative tradition.”⁵ Its use of the term “narrative” shows a sensitive awareness of the nature of narrative in the Chinese tradition as well as a timely response to the change of focus in the West. The word *xiaoshuo* is not as broad in scope as the general term “narrative,” but it is also a “catchall basket” in the Chinese tradition, broad enough to necessitate a reconsideration of its denotations and connotations over history and a delimiting of its parameters. In the present study of Chinese *xiaoshuo*, I will go in the opposite direction from the Western trend and turn

from a general approach to narrative to a narrow focus on prose fiction. I take this direction for two fundamental reasons. First, as scholars have noted, there has been a shift in *xiaoshuo* from being a general category of narrative to a specific literary form, which in the Chinese tradition shows a narrowing rather than a broadening of focus. Second, there is a visible transition in the development of Chinese *xiaoshuo* from historicity to fictionality. This transition also narrowed down the scope of *xiaoshuo* from a catchall category to a specific literary category, prose fiction.

In this part of my book, I will explore how the Chinese notion of *xiaoshuo* evolved from an amorphous category in the beginning to the modern notion of fiction culminating in the maturity of *zhanghui*-style *xiaoshuo* (the chaptered novel). In their influential study *The Nature of Narrative*, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg characterize studies of Western narrative in the middle of the twentieth century as “hopelessly novel-centered”⁶ with assumptions about narrative and expectations from reading narrative works derived solely from the novel. In reaction against this dominant trend in narrative studies, they call for an almost opposite approach.⁷ I understand their reaction against the hegemony of the realistic novel and the necessity to use narrative as a way to broaden views of literature, but I find their rejection of the novel as the final product of an ameliorative evolution somewhat problematic. My main objection is that their definition of the novel is a narrow one based on the realistic novels in the Western tradition. The realistic novel is certainly not the final product, but the novel as a literary genre has a sense of finality on two accounts. First, it is a literary form of totality and comprehensive capacity. Second, it never ceases to change and grow, and no one can predict when it will stop growing and what it will finally become. M. M. Bakhtin points out, “[T]he novel is a developing genre; they [symptoms of change] are sharper and more significant because the novel is in the vanguard of change. The novel may thus serve as a document for gauging the lofty and still distant destinies of literature’s future unfolding.”⁸ The multifarious novelistic practice after the rise of the realistic tradition in the West and the diversified development of the novel in the Chinese tradition have confirmed the chameleonlike nature of the novel and its capability as a totalizing literary form. Because of its totalizing nature, the novel as a literary form is slippery and tends to resist conceptual categorization. D. H. Lawrence, who considerably enlarged the scope of the modern novel, once remarked: “Everything is true in its own time, place, circumstance, and untrue outside of its own place, time, circumstance. If you try to nail anything down, in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up, and walks away with the nail.”⁹

For these reasons, and in consideration of the evolutionary history of *xiaoshuo* in the Chinese tradition, I do not view the novel as “only one of a number of narrative possibilities” as Scholes and Kellogg do in the Western tradition. Instead, I consider the chaptered novel in the Chinese tradition as the final product of an evolutionary process and as the perfected narrative

form that earlier forms of narrative—myths, legends, literary anecdotes, folktales, personal biographies, historical narratives, short stories, novellas, and so on—have helped to make.

A study of this evolution will involve two basic approaches: historical review and conceptual analysis. In existent scholarship, the former has taken precedence over the latter. I consider this a regrettable tendency. As early as the 1970s, Patrick Hanan, in his study of the classification of early Chinese *xiaoshuo* writings, sagaciously pointed out that although one should not ignore the importance of historical method, it should be subordinate to objective analysis.¹⁰ I will try to bear in mind this advice. In a historical analysis of *xiaoshuo*'s evolution, I will describe a struggle between historical inertia and pure fiction in *xiaoshuo*'s movement away from historicity and toward fictionality, and examine its impact upon *xiaoshuo*'s journey from its modest beginning as a form of anecdotal snippets to its dominant position in the pantheon of modern Chinese literature. I am not content with a historical study of its development, however; I attempt to embark on a conceptual inquiry into the ontological and epistemological conditions of *xiaoshuo* as an aesthetic category in Chinese literature. In this chapter, I will conduct an inquiry into the Chinese concept *xiaoshuo* as well as into the rise and intrinsic nature of Chinese fiction.

CHINESE *XIAOSHUO* AND WESTERN "FICTION"

"Fiction" is a Western concept. It has two related meanings: (1) a literary category; (2) a mode of writing. As a literary category, it refers to a literary form in contradistinction to poetry and drama. As a mode of writing, it means composing prose works in the manner of fabrication. In this study, my concern is both with fiction as a literary category and with fictionality as the defining characteristic and core of the category, with an emphasis on the latter. To use the terminology from the Chinese tradition, the emphasis will be more on *xugou* ("fictitious construct," to construct in a fictitious manner) than on *xugou wenxue* (fictional literature). The closest term to the Western idea of fiction in China is, of course, *xiaoshuo* in its modern sense, which refers to the short story, the novella, and the novel in popular perception. The term, according to accepted opinion, acquired its present connotations quite late in the Chinese tradition, and there are some differences between Chinese *xiaoshuo* and Western "fiction," which must be clarified before we can come to a clear understanding of Chinese fiction. In his study of Chinese narrative, Victor Mair makes the following remark about the differences between Chinese *xiaoshuo* and Western fiction:

[The] Chinese term for "fiction" is *hsiao-shuo* (literally, "small talk" or "minor talk"). This immediately points to a fundamental contrast with the English word, which is derived ultimately from the past participle of Latin *fingere* ("to

form” or “to fashion,” “to invent”). Where the Chinese term etymologically implies a kind of gossip or anecdote, the English word indicates something made up or created by an author or writer. “*Hsiao-shuo*” imports something, not of particularly great moment, that is presumed actually to have happened; “fiction” suggests something an author dreamed up in his mind. By calling his work “fiction,” an author expressly disclaims that it directly reflects real events and people; when a literary piece is declared to be “*hsiao-shuo*,” we are given to understand that it is gossip or report. For this reason, many recorders of *hsiao-shuo* are at great pains to tell us exactly from whom, when, where, and in what circumstances they heard their stories.¹¹

Mair’s contrast succeeds in bringing out some of the major differences between Chinese notions of *xiaoshuo* and Western ideas of fiction, but the contrasting view growing out of the comparison presents some problems. First, the comparison is between an early notion of Chinese *xiaoshuo* and the modern Western idea of fiction. The problem does not simply lie in the contrast between an ancient idea and a modern notion. As I will show, in the accepted scholarly consensus the connotations of the early Chinese *xiaoshuo* that come close to the modern idea of fiction have been consistently overlooked, either purposefully or carelessly. Because of this neglect, the comparison is like one between oranges and apples, which both belong to the category of fruit and are round in shape, but taste different. It is therefore somewhat problematic to contrast them as though they were equivalent concepts. Second, the word *xiaoshuo* in the modern reader’s mind does not evoke the negative associations that resulted from the Confucian prejudice against this genre in ancient times. True, *xiaoshuo* used to be a low literary genre in ancient Chinese society, but after the appearance of the *Hongloumeng* in the eighteenth century, and especially after Liang Qichao’s call for a “revolution in *xiaoshuo* 小說革命” and other scholars’ vigorous promotion of this genre in the early years of the twentieth century, *xiaoshuo* is no longer a despised literary genre. Third, as I will show, even in the earliest notion of *xiaoshuo* there were elements that are not much different from elements in the modern notion of fiction. I suggest that a fair comparison or contrast between Chinese *xiaoshuo* and Western fiction should not be confined to the etymological examination of their similarities and differences but should be conducted in a historical, conceptual, and aesthetic consideration of their origins, nature, function, and formal techniques.

In linguistic terms, *xiaoshuo* is a signifier. Moreover, it is a floating signifier whose signified has never been stable but has gone through a process of change and substitution, which engenders a gamut of meanings ranging from “petty talk” at its earliest inception to “fictional work” in its modern meaning. In ancient China, *xiaoshuo* is a catchall term for any writing that was not considered as serious, while it now refers to something similar to the Western conception of fiction. According to a popular dictionary of literary terms, fiction in English is a “vague and general term for an imaginative work, usually in prose”¹² and

hence is also a floating signifier. Oddly enough, even though poetry and drama are both imaginatively contrived literary accounts, and therefore should be regarded as different forms of fiction, as Plato, Aristotle, and Northrop Frye¹³ have viewed them, they are normally not included in the category of fiction. The situation is similar in the Chinese tradition. "Fiction," Y. W. Ma writes in his essay on Chinese fiction in the *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, "may be defined as a composition written mainly in prose that creates an imaginative rather than factual reality. This permits the exclusion of drama and narrative poetry."¹⁴ Since both *xiaoshuo* and "fiction" include the story, the novella, and the novel, *xiaoshuo* in its modern sense should be viewed as a rough equivalent of the Western term "fiction" with due attention to their nuances of difference. As a textual representation of interlocking events that have not happened in life but may happen by the law of probability, both Chinese *xiaoshuo* and Western "fiction" should be more appropriately called "narrative fiction in prose."

FROM "XIAOSHUO" TO XIAOSHUO

The title of this section is not a play on words. It is meant to succinctly capture a transformative process in the development of Chinese fiction. The "*xiaoshuo*" in quotation marks refers to an amorphous, nonliterary category, while *xiaoshuo* without quotation marks refers to the literary category of fiction. The distinction between "*xiaoshuo*" and *xiaoshuo* seems to support the scholarly consensus that the early notion of *xiaoshuo* and the modern notion of *xiaoshuo* have little in common, but this is not my intention. One of the aims of this chapter is to critically examine the accepted scholarly opinion and to find out to what extent it is true to the evolution of the term and to the intrinsic conditions of *xiaoshuo* as a literary form. In traditional China prior to modern times, *xiaoshuo* was a catchall term for writings that did not belong to official history, classics, or orthodox branches of learning. As Sheldon Lu notes: "It is no exaggeration to say that Chinese fiction is an anti-genre and anti-discourse in that it breaks down the hierarchies of the literary canon; it has always been an unsettling force to the literary establishment."¹⁵ Indeed, *xiaoshuo* is such a slippery term that even if one thinks one has got a handle on it, one soon comes to the disconcerting realization that it has escaped one's grasp. Perhaps, rather than attempting to offer a hard-and-fast definition or an inclusive view of what *xiaoshuo* or the Chinese view of fiction is at this stage of my inquiry, a more meaningful approach may be to examine the denotation and connotation of the term *xiaoshuo* in its historical evolution. In my opinion, without first examining the concept *xiaoshuo*, we cannot adequately understand its intrinsic rise, true nature, internal structure, and even historical development.

With few exceptions, practically all studies of Chinese notion of fiction start with examining the etymology of the term in its historical development. While this approach may give us some valuable insight into the matter, the scholarly

consensus based on this approach has left us in a state of bewilderment as to the relationship between the early and modern notions. An etymological inquiry into its origin seems to lead us to a conclusion that was allegorically imparted in the Chinese parable of the sword seeker: a man accidentally drops a sword into a river while sailing in a boat. Instead of jumping into the water to recover his sword immediately, he cuts a mark by the side of the boat where the sword has disappeared, and does not dive into the water at the mark to search for the sword until the boat arrives at its destination. His disappointment has been known to all educated Chinese through the ages. To put the scholarly consensus in semi-otic terms, *xiaoshuo* is a signifier; its signified has never been stable. Indeed, its earliest signified and modern signified have little in common with each other. Practically all traditional and modern scholars have upheld this view. The earliest record of the expression *xiaoshuo* appears in the *Zhuangzi*: “If you parade your little theories (to fish for renown), you will be far away from the Great Dao.”¹⁶ In Xunzi’s “Zhengming” (Rectification of Names) chapter, we find another expression, *xiaojia zhenshuo*¹⁷ (the exotic theories of the minor schools), which has similar connotation to Zhuangzi’s notion of *xiaoshuo*.

According to Zhuangzi’s and Xunzi’s usage, the term *xiaoshuo* refers to insignificant topics and ideas on metaphysical reasoning, moral advice, or political persuasion. As Hellmut Wilhelm rightly points out, “In both cases the word (說) is to be read *shui*, meaning ‘political advice or persuasion’ also in connection with the word (小), ‘minor or petty’; and in both cases reference is made to the adornment or embellishment of such political advice.”¹⁸ It therefore has been generally accepted as having little bearing on the modern notion of *xiaoshuo* or fiction. I argue that even the earliest notion of *xiaoshuo* has something inherent that connects it to the modern sense of fiction. Ban Gu 班固 (32–92) was the first scholar in Chinese history to provide a description of *xiaoshuo*, but his notion of *xiaoshuo* has been misread by most scholars including Lu Xun. The misreading may be partially seen in an oft-quoted English translation of Ban Gu’s definition in Lu Xun’s pioneering study of Chinese fiction: “The *Hsiao-shuo* writers succeeded those of the Chou dynasty whose task it was to collect the gossip of the streets. Confucius said: ‘Even by-ways are worth exploring. But if we go too far we may be bogged down.’ Gentlemen do not undertake this themselves, but neither do they dismiss such talk altogether. They have the sayings of the common people collected and kept, as some of them may prove useful. This was at least the opinion of country rustics.”¹⁹ This understanding of early *xiaoshuo* writings as “the gossip of the streets,” which has been reiterated time and again over history, is the source of the consensus that the early meaning of the word has little to do with modern fiction. Ban Gu’s definition of *xiaoshuo*, as I will show later, has something that has been misunderstood or overlooked in existent scholarship. He listed fifteen categories of *xiaoshuo*, which cover diverse subjects such as historical events, miscellaneous discourses, witchcraft, medicine, and mathematical knowledge. One scholar’s comment on Ban Gu’s definition and classification represents a widely accepted opinion among Chinese and

Western scholars: “While it is true that presently the term *hsiao-shuo* is translated ‘fiction,’ in the Han dynasty its sense was very different. No serious modern scholar finds examples of early fiction (or early narrative precursors of fiction) among items in the first *hsiao-shuo* list, that of the Han-shu ‘I-wen-chih’; much less would anyone argue that such examples were confined to that list.”²⁰

The history of *xiaoshuo* theory by Wang Rumei and Zhang Yu puts Ban Gu’s definition of *xiaoshuo* into the historian’s category. Their move is both correct and problematic. Correct because Ban Gu’s classification is a historian’s move; problematic because the content of the definition and the *xiaoshuo* writings that Ban Gu listed do not strictly belong to history. I would argue that Ban Gu’s effort represents the first attempt by the orthodox discourse to control and contain the rebellious nature of *xiaoshuo*. Despite his low opinion of *xiaoshuo*, Ban Gu’s classification reveals his sagacity and aesthetic sensitivity, which were seldom equaled by later historians. Though none of them is extant, the fifteen categories of *xiaoshuo* writings inform us by their titles alone that *xiaoshuo* is a form of writing different from historiography and close to the modern term “fiction.”

Historians after Ban Gu, perhaps because of the deeper entrenchment of orthodox discourse, displayed more antipathy to *xiaoshuo* writings. Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661–721), the historian who composed China’s first systematic theory of history writing, adopted Ban Gu’s and enlarged Ban Gu’s categories of classification, but he showed less aesthetic sensibility by classifying *xiaoshuo* writings into ten categories that have little to do with *xiaoshuo* as a form of literary writing: 偏記 (minor records), 小錄 (notes on insignificant matters), 逸事 (anecdotes), 瑣言 (scraps of remarks), 郡書 (biographies of local elites), 家史 (family histories), 別傳 (unofficial biographies), 雜記 (miscellaneous records), 地理 (geographical records), and 都邑簿 (records of cities and towns). In his classification, only a few categories include writings that may be viewed as fictional works today. Liu Zhiji emphasized the factuality and truthfulness of historical materials, and viewed *xiaoshuo* as a defective form of history or biography. Nevertheless, consistent with the Confucian literary policy of *zhaoan* 招安, he subsumed *xiaoshuo* under the larger category of historical records: “From this we know that *xiaoshuo* in the fashion of minor records forms a school of its own, but it can supplement official history.”²¹ They may have changed from philosophical writings to historical writings, but *xiaoshuo* writings, in his conception, were not any nearer to the genre of belles-lettres.

A comparative latecomer, Hu Yinglin (1551–1602) was perhaps one of the few scholars whose understanding of *xiaoshuo*’s intrinsic nature rivals that of Ban Gu. I agree with Wang Rumei and Zhang Yu’s assessment: Hu noticed the aesthetic features and social function of *xiaoshuo*, recognized its differences from historiography, proposed to give it an independent status, and conducted fairly detailed classification of *xiaoshuo* writings.²² But I disagree with their claim that Hu’s study clarified and rendered accurate the concept of *xiaoshuo*.²³ Except for its larger scope and more detailed analysis, his understanding was not much different from that of Ban Gu. In discussing *xiaoshuo*’s relation to other schools of writing, Ban Gu

wrote: "Among the ten schools of philosophical writings, only nine are worth examination."²⁴ Hu Yinglin restated Ban Gu's view: "As a category, the school of philosophical writings consists of ten branches. In the past, people only talk about nine. One of them they did not mention is *xiaoshuo*."²⁵ He more or less followed Ban Gu's classification and initiated a new method of dividing *xiaoshuo* into six branches.²⁶ Unlike Liu Zhiji, who subsumed *xiaoshuo* writings under the category of history, he reverted to Ban Gu's classification and put *xiaoshuo* back into the big category of philosophical writings. In view of the fact that by Hu's time the four big categories of writings—*jing* (classics), *shi* (historical writings), *zi* (philosophical writings), and *ji* (belletristic writings)—were well established, Hu's failure to classify *xiaoshuo* writings into the belletristic category is an eloquent proof that his understanding of *xiaoshuo*'s nature was not any closer to the modern notion of fiction. During the Qing dynasty, Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805), the general editor of *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書, still viewed *xiaoshuo* writings as belonging to the category of philosophical writings and classified "the category of *xiaoshuo* writers" into three catchall categories: 雜事 (miscellaneous events), 異聞 (unusual hearsay), and 瑣語 (insignificant remarks).²⁷ Neither Hu Yinglin nor Ji Yun made a mention of vernacular fiction, which was circulating widely among readers at that time. It is not that they were unaware of the fictional writings of their times, but that they did not treat *xiaoshuo* as literary works. Their method of categorization that made no mention of *xiaoshuo* as a literary category seems to have corroborated the accepted view that the early notion of *xiaoshuo* has little to do with the modern notion of fiction. Lu Xun's pioneering study of *xiaoshuo* supports this view: "When it comes to the section on literature and art in the *Han Dynasty History*, *xiaoshuo* means 'the gossip of the streets,' which is closer to what is called fiction today. But it was still no more than a collection of small talk of the common people made by the king's officers so that they could study popular sentiment and customs. It is not the same as modern fiction."²⁸

So the accepted scholarly opinion of *xiaoshuo* forces us to draw the conclusion that the early denotation of *xiaoshuo* and the modern denotation of *xiaoshuo* are a mismatch. It seems that the early notion of *xiaoshuo* indeed resembles the sword accidentally dropped into the river in that famous parable, and the modern notion of *xiaoshuo* is like the mark cut on the side of the boat. Just as the mark no longer correctly points to where the sword was dropped, the modern term is a signifier that has so radically deviated from its original signified that the two terms are different categories with only an identical name. In a word, the modern term seems to be a misnomer that has no relation to its erstwhile denotations and connotations.

I venture to contend, however, that the mismatch between the early and the modern notions of *xiaoshuo* has been exaggerated largely due to a two-thousand-year-long misinterpretation of Ban Gu's definition of *xiaoshuo* as only referring to "gossip of the streets." The modern term *xiaoshuo* for fiction (the short story, novella, and novel), commonly viewed as a concept born out of habitual use, is not entirely a misnomer. There is a continuity between the early and modern

notions, but that continuity has been deeply buried under layers of history and discourse or overlooked because of prejudices and exegetical inertia.

To summarize the extant studies of the notion of *xiaoshuo*, there are three approaches: (1) an etymological approach, which analyzes the evolution of the term *xiaoshuo*; (2) a content approach that explores the similarity of *xiaoshuo* writing and fictional works in subject matter; and (3) a formal approach that analyzes *xiaoshuo* writings to show their similarity to modern notions of fiction. These approaches should be integrated with a conceptual approach that examines the ontological, epistemological, and aesthetical conditions of *xiaoshuo*. A single approach is incapable of recovering *xiaoshuo*'s continuity, still less its intrinsic features. I propose that we adopt an approach to the idea of *xiaoshuo* that combines studies of early critical discourses, analysis of *xiaoshuo* writings, and modern theories of fiction and narrative. Otherwise, we will be unable either to see the continuity between early and modern notions or to have an adequate understanding of *xiaoshuo*'s genesis, evolution, nature, and function. In the integrated approach, we need to conduct a conceptual inquiry by examining *xiaoshuo* writings as well as discourses on *xiaoshuo* in relation to contemporary theories of fiction, narrative, history, and fictionality.

THE CONTINUITY OF FICTIONALITY IN *XIAOSHUO*

My inquiry into the nature of *xiaoshuo* has uncovered a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, scholars in history generally agree that Chinese fiction evolved from the early *xiaoshuo* writings. But on the other hand, the extant theoretical materials concerning *xiaoshuo* seem to suggest that the early view of *xiaoshuo* as petty talk and the modern view of *xiaoshuo* as fictional works seem to refer to two entirely different categories. How can we reconcile this paradox? Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1738–1801), a scholar of the Qing, found an easy way out and believed that the early meaning of *xiaoshuo* was lost and that the modern notion of *xiaoshuo* therefore was a misnomer. After reviewing the evolution of *xiaoshuo* through the ages from the inception of the term to its modern usage, he came to this conclusion: “[*Xiaoshuo*] originated from the petty officials of the court. This is recorded in the bibliographical treatise of the Han History. After three stages of transformation, it has completely lost its connection with the original sources in ancient times.”²⁹ Zhang Xuecheng seems to suggest that the later meaning of *xiaoshuo* as fiction deviated entirely from its early connotations. I, however, suggest that if we grasp the intrinsic reason for the rise of *xiaoshuo* and the intrinsic value of fictional work, we will be able to see that the later concept of *xiaoshuo* not only evolved from its early namesake but also carried on its intrinsic connotations, despite changes in history, ideological orientations, and aesthetic tastes.

Traditional scholars have viewed the early notion of *xiaoshuo* and the later notion of *xiaoshuo* as two different categories simply because they did not view *xiaoshuo* as belonging to the realm of belles lettres. When we approach *xiaoshuo*

as literary writings, we can find connotations similar to the modern sense of fiction. Zhuangzi's and Xunzi's remarks on *xiaoshuo* are too brief to merit much analysis, but extant records of the Han allow us to have a glimpse into its connotations when scholars of that time began to establish *xiaoshuo* as a school of scholarship. We need to restart from Ban Gu's definition in *Hanshu yiwen zhi* 漢書藝文志. Ban Gu adopted a Confucian approach to *xiaoshuo*, listing *xiaoshuo* writers in "Zhuzi lue" ("Philosophers Section") and placing them last among the ten schools, which also include Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, Legalism, Yin-yang theory, the Zongheng school, Logicians, the Miscellaneous school, and Agriculturists. Ban Gu's mention of fifteen schools of *xiaoshuo* with 1,380 individual pieces suggests that at that time there must have existed a large number of *xiaoshuo* writings. Unfortunately, practically all the listed schools of *xiaoshuo* have been lost, and only a few fragments have survived. Nowadays, inquiries into *xiaoshuo* rest on a few notes. But an investigation of these remaining notes will give us an inkling of what those *xiaoshuo* writings were.

Ban Gu's remarks on *xiaoshuo* constitute the earliest source for the nature of this category and have been regarded as authoritative. Unfortunately, due to the accepted opinion which does not view the early notion of *xiaoshuo* as having anything to do with the later notion, scholars have consistently overlooked its implications. A close reading of Ban Gu's remarks, guided by a desire to overcome exegetical inertia, will reveal that he treats *xiaoshuo* as imaginative creations of some kind. Let me quote again Ban Gu's statement on *xiaoshuo*. Wilhelm's English translation reads: "The trend of *Hsiao-shuo-chia* emerged from the (Board) of Petty Officials, *Pei-Kuan* (稗官). It was created by those who picked up the gossip of the streets and the sayings of the alleys and repeated what they had heard wherever they went 小說家者流，蓋出于稗官。街談巷語，道聽途說者之所造也。"³⁰ We should note a few intriguing but neglected points. First, the word *zao*, which means "invent" or "fabricate" in Chinese, has exactly the same root meaning as the Latin root of the Western term "fiction." Second, the scholarly consensus that equates *xiaoshuo* with gossip and rumors seems to be the outcome of a reading, based on a time-honored understanding, that did not take into account the whole context of the statement. In my opinion, Ban Gu's statement was incorrectly punctuated. *Jietan xiangyu* does not stand as an independent phrase meaning "gossip and rumors," but serves as a modifying phrase with the meaning of "street talk" parallel to *daoting tushuo*. The antithetical nature of the two phrases suggests that both are attributive phrases modifying the noun *zhe*. Thus, the statement should be punctuated as: 小說家者流，蓋出于稗官。街談巷語、道聽途說者之所造也。" According to this new reading, Ban Gu's statement should be translated as: "The school of *xiaoshuo* writings came from the petty officials of the court. They are fabrications by those who engaged themselves in idle talk in the streets and alleys and by those who heard gossip and rumors on the way." The main difference between the traditional and new readings is that while the former views the rise of *xiaoshuo* as a trend started by the petty officials of the court, the latter

attributes the origin of *xiaoshuo* to people in the streets who turned idle talk and gossip into fabricated accounts. My new reading entails a conclusion that people in the streets and gossipmongers were the original creators of *xiaoshuo* and the petty officials of the court were its secondary makers.

Thus, when *xiaoshuo* became records in the petty official's office, they had already gone through a process of selection, arrangement, and embellishment, and may have become quite sophisticated accounts. A close reading of Ban Gu's further statement tells us how early *xiaoshuo* writings were composed:

Confucius said: "Even byways are worth exploring. But if one goes too far, he may be bogged down." Gentlemen do not compose *xiaoshuo* themselves, but neither do they dismiss *xiaoshuo* altogether. When moderately educated persons in the neighborhood encounter them, they have them stitched together so that they may not lapse into oblivion. If any of them may prove worth preserving, it is only because they represent the opinions of rustics and eccentrics.³¹

This passage and the preceding passage supply us with valuable information on the genesis and nature of early *xiaoshuo* writings. The sources of *xiaoshuo* are common people's words and opinions, but the common people themselves were not the creators of *xiaoshuo*; they only provided the raw materials for creating *xiaoshuo*. Because of the mundane nature of these raw materials, Confucian gentlemen would not deign to collect them, still less create *xiaoshuo* with them. People with moderate education were not collectors of raw materials, but creators of *xiaoshuo* in the true sense of the word. We should note the word *zhui* 綴. It means "stitch together" or "connect."³² The petty intellectuals did not simply collect raw materials from life. Like a modern fiction writer, they "stitched together" (*zhui*) or wove their raw materials into *xiaoshuo* writings. The act of "stitching together" may range from plot arrangement to discourse embellishment. Not all petty literati could be the creators of *xiaoshuo*. Ban Gu tells us at another place in his treatise: "*Xiaoshuo* were composed by those with an untrammelled mind 放者為之." Thus, the genesis of *xiaoshuo* writings, in Ban Gu's characterization, is similar to that of later fictional works in the Ming and Qing periods: petty literati who, in close contact with the common people, defied the traditional belittlement of *xiaoshuo* as a literary genre and turned raw materials drawn from life into interesting stories.

What my reading has uncovered is a process of creation and re-creation: petty intellectuals collected the raw materials, from which they created *xiaoshuo* writings, and petty officials of the king's court re-created them in their editorial efforts. The end product of this process was not anecdotal snippets but fairly sophisticated *xiaoshuo* writings. Their sophistication can be gauged from the fact that Ban Gu listed fifteen schools of them in his treatise, even though only a few fragments have survived. Many of the *xiaoshuo* writings in Ban Gu's listed schools may have resembled the extant "Yan Danzi 燕丹子" and "Feiyan waizhuan 飛燕外傳" in content and form. Understandably, "Yan Danzi" and "Feiyan waizhuan" survived because both of them are literary accounts of true

historical events. In this respect, history played a dual role. Under the protection of history, the *Mu Tianzi zhuan* 穆天子傳, perhaps the earliest specimen of Chinese historical fiction, came to be preserved.³³ All other *xiaoshuo* writings were consigned to oblivion, because Confucian disparagement and censorship would not allow them to exist. The surviving *xiaoshuo* writings from the Han constitute evidence that corroborates Ban Gu's view, and they have some of the features characteristic of the later *xiaoshuo* genres. It is reasonable to surmise that in the transition from the crude "discourse" heard in the street to sophisticated *xiaoshuo* writings produced in the petty officials' office, there was a complex process of fabrication, which suggests an artistry similar to the making of modern fiction, albeit on a smaller scale.

Huan Tan 桓譚 (c. 43 BC–AD 28) in his "Xinlun 新論" corroborated Ban Gu's view: "Those *xiaoshuo* writers, combining miscellaneous and short remarks with allegorical discussions taken from things at hand, created short writings. They are not lacking words worth examining for the sake of cultivating oneself and managing one's household."³⁴ Huan Tan's remark confirms that *xiaoshuo* writings were not all scraps of words passed on from mouth to mouth; some were compositions with allegorical meanings in figurative language. Liu Zhiji did not have a high opinion of *xiaoshuo*, nor did he view it as a category belonging to belles lettres. But in his treatise on history writing, his prejudiced comment reveals *xiaoshuo*'s genesis, nature, and mode of composition:

When irresponsible people compose *xiaoshuo*, it becomes a perfunctory form of writing that records hearsay without annotations. As a result, the real and false are not distinguished, the right and wrong are confused. Guo Xian's *Dongming ji* and Wang Jia's *Shiyi ji* are such writings. These writings are completely composed of fictitious words intended to surprise the ignorant and vulgar folk. These show to what extent *xiaoshuo* can be harmful.³⁵

Like Ban Gu, Liu Zhiji considered *xiaoshuo* as something composed by persons with an unconventional mind. He identified the mixture of the real and unreal in *xiaoshuo* writings, which is a characteristic feature of fiction. Most significantly, he came to the realization that some *xiaoshuo* writings are works composed in a fictitious manner with a fictitious subject matter. Inadvertently, he touched on the fictionality of *xiaoshuo*, the core of the modern notion of fiction. Although his identification of some essential elements of *xiaoshuo* writings was not consciously made, and certainly not intended to promote *xiaoshuo* as a literary genre, it inadvertently lends strong support to my argument that the early notion of *xiaoshuo* has similarities to the later notion. From a critical point of view, Liu Zhiji also correctly identified the *Dongming ji* and *Shiyi ji* as fictional works, the purpose of which is to appeal to popular taste. Although Liu Zhiji's comment was made on *xiaoshuo* writings after the Han, the continuity of the genre suggests that many of the early *xiaoshuo* writings may not have been very different from the tales of *zhiguai* 志怪 and *zhiren* 志人, genres in the Wei and Jin dynasties. These *xiaoshuo* writings of the later period were

more likely fabricated tales than pseudophilosophy and pseudohistory writings that survived rigorous selection and censorship.

Lu Xun's speculative view, based on his annotations of Ban Gu, was this: "Generally speaking, some of these writings pretend to be written by ancients; some record ancient events. Those which claim to be written by ancients resemble philosophical writings but are shallow. Those which record past events come close to histories but seem absurd."³⁶ In his opinion, *xiaoshuo* at that time was a form of writing that is halfway between philosophy and history. This view has become the scholarly consensus up to the present day. When people talk about *xiaoshuo* before the Six Dynasties, few have looked upon them as literary works. But even in Lu Xun's speculation, *xiaoshuo* does have some characteristics that come close to the later notion of fiction. *Xiaoshuo's* recording of people is shallower than philosophical writings, and its recording of events does not adhere to facts. The first point shows *xiaoshuo* writing as a reflection of human life; the second point touches on fictionality. The combination of the two points comes close to the modern notion of fiction, which is a fictitious reflection of and on human life.

The lack of enough early *xiaoshuo* writings hinders our research into their nature, but this lack itself may give an idea as to why early *xiaoshuo* writings failed to survive the ages. The reason is not difficult to surmise. Apart from what I have labeled the "tyranny of history," it must have had much to do with the Confucian attitude. The putatively Confucian view of *xiaoshuo* reminds us of the origins of the Confucian classic, the *Shijing* or the *Book of Songs*. Many of the 365 poems in the *Book of Songs* were believed to have been collected by royal officials and were later believed to have been edited by Confucius. A note to Ban Gu's remark on *xiaoshuo* states: "Since the former kings wanted to learn of the customs and habits of the local neighborhoods and alleys, they set up the office of *xiaoshuo* to report them."³⁷ A comparative analysis of Confucius's supposed relation to both the *Shijing* and *xiaoshuo* will offer insight into the nature of early *xiaoshuo*, and allow us to speculate on what *xiaoshuo* writings looked like in the remotest past and its later uneasy relationship with poetry. Both *Shijing* poems and *xiaoshuo* writings were allegedly collected by royal officials from among the common people, but the two categories of writings received entirely different treatment by the reputed editor Confucius, who really represented the orthodox attitude toward the two different forms of writings. While the songs that were to make up the *Shijing* were favorably received and honored, the *xiaoshuo* writings from the alleys and streets received disparagement and were only given a minor role as something that could broaden people's knowledge. I bring up this point not only to show how the genre of *xiaoshuo* was mistreated but moreover to suggest two points for further discussions. First, *xiaoshuo* and poetry share a common ground because of their common provenance in the common people's natural and spontaneous literary creativity. This common ground may explain why Chinese *xiaoshuo* writing patently possesses features inherent in Chinese poetry. Second, the

impact of the mistreatment is not entirely negative in *xiaoshuo*'s evolution into the modern notion of fiction. Both points I will discuss in detail in chapter 4. But for the time being, I think that the different treatment should be examined in two aspects: that of the content and that of its function. Let me deal with its function first. In the Confucian moral order, *xiaoshuo* functions as a supplement to the classics. Its generic function as a form of entertainment was almost completely overlooked until very late. Liu Xie's (c. 465–520) monumental study of Chinese literature up to his time, *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍, discusses all the existent literary and nonliterary forms and genres, including historical and philosophical writings, but he left out *xiaoshuo* writings. Only in the chapter "Xieyin 諧隱" did he make mention of *xiaoshuo*:

However, the place of the *hsieh* and *yin* in literature is comparable to that of the "Small Talk" [anecdotal writings which were considered as of no great importance] in the midst of the Nine Schools. For the petty officials collected these anecdotes to broaden their scope of observation. If one should allow himself to follow in their steps, would he be more advanced than [Ch'un-yü] K'un and [Tung-fang] So and the firm friends of Chan and Meng, the jesters?³⁸

Liu Xie's brief remark echoes an idea mentioned in Ban Gu's discussion of *xiaoshuo*. Both of them traced the origins of *xiaoshuo* to the ancient office of the *bai-guan*, a minor scribe-official who was in charge of collecting the gossip of the streets and alleys for the royal court. Liu Xie was not free from the Confucian disparagement of *xiaoshuo*, but, it is to his credit that he implicitly noticed the main function of *xiaoshuo*, which is entertainment. As far as the function of entertainment goes, *xiaoshuo* must have dealt with the same subject matter that occupies the center of later *xiaoshuo* writings. Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801) gave us a brief survey of the subject matter of *xiaoshuo*:

Xiaoshuo came from the petty officials of the Zhou court. It deals with hearsay and insignificant topics of the winding alleys. Though the ancients did not abandon it, yet it is mostly idle fancy that has no credible basis. Generally speaking, it deals with miscellaneous subjects of ghosts and gods, and additionally tells of personal gratitude or grievances. The writings in the *Dongming ji* and *Shiyi ji* and the volumes of the *Soushen ji* and *Lingyi ji* became books that established themselves as a genre since the Six Dynasties. It was not until the Tang that *xiaoshuo* developed into individual stories, which formed a separate category of *Chuangqi*. . . . These stories usually tell of the love between men and women, of separation and reunion, sorrow and happiness: The story of Hong Fu tells of how the female protagonist deserts the Yang family to elope with Li Jing; the story of an embroidered coat narrates how Li Yaxian repays Zheng Yuanhe's love; Madame Han and Mr. Yu You become a couple thanks to red leaves; Miss Cui and Mr. Zhang fall in love through zither playing. While one tale tells of how Mingzhu dies of lovesickness and returns alive, another tale narrates how Huo Xiaoyu

retaliates against her perfidious lover after her death. Some of these tales are far-fetched accounts with seeming resemblances and some are blatantly groundless fancies. Though they are multifarious in feelings and situations, they share a general commonality. Initially, *xiaoshuo* writings were no more than extravagant reflections on ancient meanings, or the outcome of literati's consigning their emotions to wine, and they were not any different from the miscellaneous amorous poems of the Musical Bureau in the poetic genre. Since the Song and Yuan dynasties, *xiaoshuo* broadened into novels and was adapted into songs and plays. As a result, it allows the blind storytellers to sing it to the accompaniment of musical instruments and actors and actresses to perform it on stage. It appeals to people, irrespective of high or low tastes, male or female. All it does is to gratify the senses.³⁹

While Zhang Xuecheng accused *xiaoshuo* writings of abandoning their ancient origin, his survey captures the continuity of *xiaoshuo* from its earliest appearance to its later development. He grasped the main characteristic of *xiaoshuo* both in content and form. In content, it deals with subject matters that are normally eschewed by more orthodox writings; in form, it pretends that the events it relates were real happenings. While his survey is valid in terms of the development of Chinese *xiaoshuo*, his conclusion about the original conditions of *xiaoshuo* in antiquity is wrong. The subject matter of the early *xiaoshuo* and that of the later *xiaoshuo* did not change significantly over history. It is the mode of composition that changed over time.

Although Confucius never edited *xiaoshuo* as he was believed to have edited the *Shijing*, *xiaoshuo* in its early forms was "ghost-edited" by him. By this I mean that *xiaoshuo* must have been collected, edited, and classified by his followers in accordance with the principles that he had established concerning the editing of the *Shijing*. The first editing principle is that the subject matter should be morally proper in terms of Confucius's saying: "Let there be no evil in your thoughts"; the second principle is that "Pleasure not carried to the point of debauch; grief not carried to the point of self-injury"; the third principle is that "the Master never talked of prodigies, feats of strength, disorders or spirits."⁴⁰ The subject matter that Zhang Xuecheng describes fails the criteria based on the Confucian principles of decorum and moral standards. From this, we can reasonably speculate on the main reason why all the fifteen schools of *xiaoshuo* collected before the Han are now lost. The main subject matter of early *xiaoshuo* writings must have been the same as that in the later *xiaoshuo* writings that has been criticized by Confucian scholars. What was allowed to exist by the Confucian standard in early *xiaoshuo* writings therefore came close to writings of history and philosophy that are morally acceptable and play a socially useful function in the Confucian world order of the Han, when Confucianism became the state orthodoxy. The rise of *zhiguai* and *zhiren xiaoshuo* in the Six Dynasties and of the *chuanqi xiaoshuo* in the Tang is at least partly explained by the slackening control of Confucianism.

THE INTRINSIC NATURE OF *XIAOSHUO*

The Confucian disparagement of *xiaoshuo* is probably responsible not only for the virtual nonexistence of early *xiaoshuo* writings before the Six Dynasties but also for an erroneous view in Chinese literary history expressed by Wen Yiduo:

Stories and embryonic song-and-dance were not unheard of in China proper before then, but they had never developed into a division of literature. We have always seemed to be less than enthusiastic about telling stories and listening to stories. What we have shown interest in are didactic fables or factual history. We have never cultivated a taste for telling and listening to stories purely for the story's sake itself. At the least, we may say that it was the translation and preaching of Buddhist scriptures that are charged with a zest for stories which awakened in our native land a budding interest in story and which caused it then to combine with the comparatively advanced foreign forms to produce our own fiction and drama.⁴¹

Wen Yiduo's remark, emanating from an iconoclastic ideology that blinded him to the abundance of *xiaoshuo* writings before the Tang, is equivalent to saying that before the coming of Buddhist tales, Chinese writers were innately deficient in creative impulses for writing fiction. Likewise, the reading public lacked the innate desire to enjoy reading and listening to stories. Both kinds of abilities, innate to other nations, were cultivated through the introduction of Buddhism. As someone who grew up during the Cultural Revolution, I find this view as absurd as saying that in the historical period between 1966 and 1976, the virtual nonexistence of *xiaoshuo* writings in official publications in mainland China reveals the startling phenomenon that the Chinese nation suddenly lost her ability to create and enjoy fictional works. If anything, the lack of *xiaoshuo* writings during the Cultural Revolution should afford us an insight into why only a few *xiaoshuo* writings before the Six Dynasties have survived to this day. Governmental censorship and self-censorship were largely responsible for the disappearance of all but a few early *xiaoshuo* writings. The meager early *xiaoshuo* writings were able to survive only after they pledged their allegiance to historical writings.

Since Indian Buddhism has been identified by some scholars as the formative influence on the rise of Chinese fiction, we may as well examine the matter a little from the comparative perspective. In Western literary theory, fiction is believed to have had its origin in epic and drama. India also has an epic tradition, which may be taken to be the source of Indian fiction. When we look at the Indian tradition, however, we notice an interesting contrast with the Chinese tradition. While early China has an abundance of historical records but little fictional writings, early India has two world famous epics—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*—but has no early histories. This contrast does not imply that China had no epical and fictional impulse in its early development, nor does it suggest that India had no sense of history. I believe early civilizations

have similar creative impulses. The contrast strongly suggests that different traditions channeled their creative energies in different directions, with the result that there were emphases on different literary forms. In early India, the creative impulse for writing histories was channeled into writing epics and dramas, the early forms of fiction. By contrast, in China, the creative impulse for writing fictional works was oriented toward writing histories. In his theoretical inquiry into Chinese narrative, Andrew Plaks makes a sagacious observation when he comments on the absence of epic tradition in early China: “But certainly the bearers of Chinese civilization have liked a good story as well as—or better than—the next man, and, what is more important, have produced what is perhaps the bulk of the world’s corpus of narrative literature. The point here is simply to acknowledge the fact that historical writing, oriented towards the function of transmission, occupies the predominant position within the range of Chinese narrative possibilities, so that it is fiction that becomes the subset and historiography the central model of narration.”⁴²

In my opinion, in the early phase of Chinese civilization there was simply no place for a subset of fiction, due to governmental policies and self-censorship. As a result, fictional works led a parasitic existence by attaching themselves to historical records. If we closely examine some historical narratives, we will realize that some so-called historical narratives are fictional works in historical disguise. The *Mu Tianzi zhuàn* (*An Account of the Travels of Emperor Mu*) (c. fourth century BC) is a typical example. For more than a thousand years after its discovery in AD 279, it was taken as a historical work; only in the Qing dynasty did Ji Yun, the general editor of the *Siku quanshu*, correctly classify it as belonging to the category of *xiaoshuo* writings. Ji Yun’s correct classification was based on his perceptive understanding of the differences between historical records and literary fiction. With exceptional insight into its true nature, W. H. Nienhauser suggests that we should consider it a “historical fiction.”⁴³ Following Ji Yun’s and other scholars’ cue, Deborah L. Porter conducts a study of the provenance, redaction, exegetical tradition, textual elements, and literary features in relation to historical records, and reconfirms Ji Yun’s insights. She further argues that it is a literary representation of the Zhou dynasty’s symbolic ways of dealing with traumatic crises and reestablishing dynastic identity, authority, and legitimacy.⁴⁴ Because of her reliance on a conceptual model of symbolism that presupposes a reconstruction of an absent referent in symbolization, she does not go any farther. In terms of available research, *the Travels of Emperor Mu* may be viewed as a Chinese epic. I may go even further and suggest that this extended historical narrative should be regarded as the first novel of magic realism as well as the first historical fiction in China. The narrative, composed and constructed on a principle of literary creation, was an imaginative representation of the creative spirit at work. In *Wenfu* (*Rhyme-Prose on Literature*), Lu Ji ably captures the creative spirit in these lines: “The writer envelops heaven and earth within shapes; and grasps myriad things with the tip of his brush”; “His spirit gallops to the eight limits of the earth; his

mind roams ten thousand yards, up and down.”⁴⁵ In a narrative form, *the Travels of Emperor Mu* presents an imaginative search comparable to Qu Yuan’s spiritual search in poetic forms in many of his poems.

Having insisted on the continuity in the evolution of the term *xiaoshuo*, I must add that the early concept, in spite of considerable overlapping in meaning with the modern concept of fiction, differs from it significantly. The difference cannot be simply resolved by a distinction between a narrow sense of *xiaoshuo* and a broad sense of *xiaoshuo*. To pin down the difference, we must be able to answer this question: What distinguishes the traditional concept of *xiaoshuo* from the modern concept of fiction? I pose this question not just because I am interested in *xiaoshuo* as a conceptual category but also because answers to this question will give us a better understanding of the historical development of Chinese *xiaoshuo* and determine the choice of *xiaoshuo* or fictional works for this study. I think, the core of conceptual difference is fictionality. In discussing traditional Chinese theoretical discourses on *xiaoshuo*, Luo Fu 羅浮 voiced a most insightful opinion about the conceptual condition of *xiaoshuo*:

What is *xiaoshuo* (small talk)? It distinguishes itself from what the *dayan* (big talk) talks about. First, it talks about the small (insignificant). It therefore will not talk about such important topics as heavenly classics and earthly meanings, the governance of the state and the education of the people, the Han Confucian scholars’ exegeses of classics and their commentaries, or the Song Confucian scholars’ efforts at cultivating the human heart through propriety and honesty. Second, it involves talk. But it will not talk about the ornate language and breadth of vision in Sima Qian’s and Ban Gu’s histories, the same artistry achieved by different means in Yang Xiong’s and Sima Xiangru’s writings, the different topics of sumptuous splendor, measured eloquence, and limpid restraint, and the different forms adopted to imitate the classics, to trace the origins of the Dao, and to analyze Sao poetry.⁴⁶

Wu Gongzheng, in his *Xiaoshuo meixue (Aesthetics of Fiction)*, rightly points out that Luo Fu drew a clear demarcation line between *xiaoshuo* writings and classics, histories, poetry, prose, and other forms of writing from the perspective of both content and form and established *xiaoshuo* as a distinct literary genre.⁴⁷ In Luo Fu’s preface, he further narrowed down the idea of *xiaoshuo* in terms of subject matter and forms of expression:

Its subject matter covers the minute details of the family, the relationship between father and son, daily necessities, food and drink, and social intercourse. Hence, it is called “small (trivial).” Its expressions are those of the idle talk on trivial matters among men and women of certain locations and places. Hence it is called “talk.” Therefore, *xiaoshuo* writings with the utmost simplicity and the characteristics most easy to understand are the orthodox school of this genre.⁴⁸

In Luo Fu's opinion, *xiaoshuo's* subject matter is ordinary events of everyday life; its medium of expression is everyday language. He stressed simplicity and clarity as the defining characteristics of *xiaoshuo*. Wu Gongzheng again rightly points out that Luo Fu's idea of fiction had already formulated an inchoate idea of realism in fiction writing.⁴⁹ But Luo Fu's identification of *xiaoshuo's* simplicity and clarity as the essence of *xiaoshuo* is only partially correct. It only grasps the formal aspect of *xiaoshuo's* essence but misses the core element of *xiaoshuo*, which is the telling of fabricated stories. We have uncovered this core element in the early description of *xiaoshuo*, and it is clearly displayed in the evolution of this genre. It is found in *shuohua* 說話 ("speaking words," storytelling), the transitional genre connecting earlier and later *xiaoshuo*. *Shuohua* is an art form of storytelling that started in the Tang and existed until the Ming. Yuan Zhen 元稹, in his own annotation of a poetic line in his poem, "Time elapses during listening to stories," wrote: "[Bai Juyi?] once told the story of 'A Twig of Flower' at the Xinchang house; the telling lasted from midnight to the morning and the story was still not finished."⁵⁰ Clearly, *shuohua* means "telling stories" rather than just "talk." From *xiaoshuo* at the beginning through *shuohua* in the process of evolution to *xiaoshuo* again in the modern sense, we can see a discernable continuity.

THE PROBLEM OF SELF-CONSCIOUS FICTIONALIZATION

The scholarly consensus in Chinese fiction studies holds that Tang fiction marks the full maturity of Chinese *xiaoshuo*. Nowadays, few scholars question this consensus, but why does Tang *xiaoshuo* represent the maturity of Chinese fiction? Lu Xun's view has been generally considered authoritative. In his opinion, *xiaoshuo* writings before the Tang resembled news reportage of modern times, and fiction writers did not intentionally create fiction as fiction:⁵¹

Xiaoshuo, like poetry, witnessed a change in the Tang dynasty. Although it is still not far away from searching for the extraordinary and recording anecdotes, yet its narration became subtle, and its diction ornate. Compared with the rough sketches of the Six Dynasties tales, its evolutionary traces were very obvious. What is most conspicuous is that by this time *xiaoshuo* writers began to consciously compose *xiaoshuo* writings.⁵²

In Lu Xun's opinion, if the Wei and Jin marked the entry of Chinese literature into a period of self-conscious creation of literary works, the Tang represented the beginning of self-conscious creation in Chinese fictional development. In a most recent study, Lu Xun's opinion has been reaffirmed. *Zhongguo xiaoshuo yishuo shi* (History of Chinese Fictional Art) recognizes that the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties period is a period of self-conscious literary creation; the notion of fiction started to be born; and major elements necessary for fiction as a literary genre appeared. But because of various reasons,

the *xiaoshuo* writings in this period, the *zhiguai* and *zhiren* tales, are still a far cry from genuine fictional works. In the title for the chapter discussing the *xiaoshuo* writings of this period, the new study simply restates Lu Xun's view: "Fei youyi zuo xiaoshuo de zhiguai zhiren" (*Zhiguai* and *Zhiren* Tales as Unconsciously Composed Fictional Works.) By contrast, the study entitles the chapter discussing the Tang *xiaoshuo* writings as "Shi youyi wei xiaoshuo de Tang chuanqi" (Tang *Chuanqi* Tales as Fictional Works by Writers Who Began to Compose *Xiaoshuo* Consciously).⁵³

My discussion in the introduction has already problematized this accepted view. The problem of conscious fictionality constitutes a theoretical issue not only for *xiaoshuo*'s historical development but also for its status as a literary genre. In this section, I will explore this issue from both historical and conceptual perspectives. What does the expression *youyi wei xiaoshuo* (consciously creating *xiaoshuo*) mean? In Lu Xun's words, it refers to a self-conscious intention to invent and fictionalize: "The writer deliberately indicates the fictitious nature of the narrated events 作者故意顯示著事跡的虛構."⁵⁴ Lu Xun's view was derived from Hu Yinglin's similar opinion:

Xiaoshuo writings about changes and strange happenings flourished in the Six Dynasties, but most of them are transmitted records with errors and inaccuracies. They may not all be fictitious accounts with hypothetical words. By the time of the Tang, people intentionally hunted for the strange and made use of *xiaoshuo* to convey allegorical meanings.⁵⁵

Both Hu and Lu Xun are of the opinion that the *xiaoshuo* writings before the Tang are radically different from those of the Tang because the authorial intention is different and only the Tang *chuanqi* tales involved conscious creation of fictional works. Recently, a few scholars have questioned this assessment. They cite authorial claims to authenticity at the end of a number of stories to argue that "it is not sufficiently convincing to treat 'self-conscious fictionalization' as the main characteristic feature of the Tang *xiaoshuo* and the reasons for its rise."⁵⁶ This questioning is provocative. Lu Xun's view of the Tang as the self-conscious age of *xiaoshuo* is valid, but his view that conscious fictionalization only started in the Tang is problematic because of conceptual as well as historical reasons.

Conscious fictionalization involves authorial intention. Theoretically, authorial intention is a very slippery category for literary studies. With the "death" of the author, it is difficult, if not impossible, to credit or discredit claims made by an author with regard to his intention in creating a literary work. Time and again literary theorists who uphold diverse views, ranging from those of New Criticism to postmodernism, have demonstrated that the pretextual and post-textual intentions are unreliable, misleading, or simply erroneous. In terms of contemporary literary theory, it is almost impossible to draw a line between self-conscious creation and mindless transmission. Historically, because of political, moral, and aesthetic reasons, a writer may try to hide his real intention

in composing a fictional work. I will critically analyze the case of Gan Bao 干寶 (fl. 320), the Jin historian and literary man, to illustrate this point. Gan Bao collected *xiaoshuo* writings of his time into *Soushen ji* 搜神記. In the collected pieces, there is no sure way to ascertain that the writers of those tales, especially those that differ little from modern short stories, did not compose their tales with conscious fictionality in mind. Those writers did not leave behind any writings about their authorial intentions. But Gan Bao, who composed some tales in the collection, also wrote a preface to it that details his intentions in compiling it. Those intentions, whether we view them as pretextual or post-textual, not only testify to the unreliable nature of authorial intention but also reveal some hidden intentions that imply conscious fictionality.

He professes that his intention in collecting those *xiaoshuo* writings is to “illuminate the truthfulness of the divine Dao.”⁵⁷ This has been cited as evidence that he was preoccupied with the truthfulness of factual records, not with the fictionality of literary imagination. But no scholar has so far read Gan Bao’s words closely to understand his implications. All scholars have overlooked that what Gan Bao emphasizes is faithfulness to the divine Dao, not truthfulness of factual records. The divine Dao is the first metaphysical principle in Chinese thought. In his remark that the collected *xiaoshuo* writings adequately illuminate the truthfulness of the divine Dao, he only means that they may serve to exemplify the metaphysical principle that underlies myriad things, not that they attest to the faithfulness of what they record. Thus, Gan Bao’s remark articulates a writing principle similar to Aristotle’s mimetic principle of fiction based the law of probability. He defends his proposition with some strategies. One of them is that due to the lapse of time and the unreliability of human perception, even official histories supposed to record historical persons and events faithfully often cannot avoid being tainted with unverifiable events and outright errors. Furthermore, he declares that if official history tolerates the inclusion of untrue events, *xiaoshuo* as a category of writing meant to complement history is justified in writing about fictitious events. Most importantly, under the pretext of collecting *xiaoshuo* writings to complement historical records, he concludes his preface with a subtle allusion to the entertaining function of *xiaoshuo*: “I wish that in the future some busybody would collect the original forms of the *xiaoshuo* writings so that one can read them for entertainment without any worry about errors.”⁵⁸ Here Gan Bao affirms the entertaining function of *xiaoshuo* and implicitly endorses conscious fictional creation under the pretext of collecting raw materials for historical writings. That he does not openly justify conscious fiction creation is understandable, because in the society of his time, scholars were still afraid of deviating from the Confucian admonition that *xiaoshuo* is something with which a gentleman should not get involved.

Gan Bao explicitly posed a distinction between the originally true account of an event and its imaginatively fictitious account, even though he considered the latter as arising from unreliable transmission. The distinction confirms that

people of the Six Dynasties period did have a sense of what is true and what is fictitious, thereby seriously questioning Lu Xun's claim that: "People of the Six Dynasties period were not engaged in consciously creating fiction, because they treated the events of ghosts and those of men as the same; both kinds were regarded as real events."⁵⁹ Lu Xun's claim evidently underestimated the intelligence of the Six Dynasties period. In my opinion, scholars of the period treated *xiaoshuo* writings as though they were factual writings not because they could not distinguish between truth and fiction but because they were under the tyranny of history. Gan Bao's case is an eloquent illustration. An overview of Gan Bao's preface shows that his attitude toward *xiaoshuo* was ambivalent, paradoxical, and contradictory. His position was determined partly by his own dual role as historian and fiction writer and partly by what I have labeled the "tyranny of history." The tyranny of history stipulated that he, as a historian, was required to observe the sine qua non of factuality in history writing, but the creative impulse in him pulled him in the direction of fictitious creation. The conflicting impulses forced him to adopt a split attitude toward *xiaoshuo*: objectively he recognized its fictitious nature, but subjectively he denied that its fictionality was consciously willed by the author. His ambivalent position does not deny the notion of conscious creation but confirms the power and intensity of history's tyranny.

Kenneth Dewoskin's bibliographical and generic study of the *zhiguai* tales supports this view. Nowadays, it is commonly accepted that the *zhiguai* tales were leftovers from the materials that historiographers collected for compiling dynastic histories. Before the Tang, though they were classified in the category of defective historical records, they were still considered historical writings. Because of their literary nature, they fit uneasily in the category of history. Dewoskin observes that during the Six Dynasties, history and *zhiguai* tales began to diverge, and by the end of the period the separation between the two became so widely accepted that fictional pieces could be composed and read for literary purposes. But the Six Dynasties did not complete the process of separation, and there was still a compelling need for a rationale to compose fictional writings.⁶⁰ With the appearance of *Leishu* 類書, the dissociation of *xiaoshuo* writings from formal historiography was complete. It "freed writers inclined toward fiction from the restraints of historical methodology, freed them to borrow from the popular oral tradition and to elaborate plots and description in prose and verse. In short, writers were freed to indulge in the conscious fictionalizing that is the distinct feature of late Six Dynasties *chih-kuai* and the T'ang *ch'uan-ch'i*."⁶¹ The process of generic divergence implies that it is not that *xiaoshuo* writers did not consciously create fictional works before the Tang but that there was no rationale that sanctioned consciously created fictional works, nor was there an appropriate category into which fictional works could fit.

It is difficult to imagine that, in a self-conscious age of literary creation, the *xiaoshuo* writers were engaged in mindless transmission of existent tales or unconscious transcription of other people's experience. Tao Yuanming's 陶

淵明 (365–427) literary activities concerning *xiaoshuo* writings alone should call the accepted claim into question. Tao compiled *Soushen houji* 搜神後記 (A Sequel to *Soushen ji*), a collection of *xiaoshuo* writings that narrate blatantly unreal and fantastic characters and events. The collection contains his famous utopian tale “The Peach Blossom Spring.” The title has since become the Chinese equivalent to the Western term “utopia.” Despite numerous attempts in history at locating the real setting for the tale, the utopian nature of this tale makes evident that it is fictitious. Utopia means “no place” in Greek. Whether it is Tao Yuanming’s “Peach Blossom Spring” or Thomas More’s *Utopia* or Plato’s *Republic*, a utopian writing is created as a consequence of the writer’s dissatisfaction with the conditions of the real world and his desire to imaginatively create a new world to his heart’s content. Neither its fictitious nature nor consciously willed fictionality is to be doubted. The very fact that Tao Yuanming’s tale is of a utopia suggests that the fictionality of the tale was consciously willed by the author. And that the author should have taken the trouble to compose a narrative poem to duplicate the tale further testifies to its conscious fictionalization.⁶² If we take Tao’s poem about the Peach Blossom Spring as a consciously written poem, by simple logic we must admit that his tale was consciously composed and its fictionality was consciously willed.

Critical analysis of *xiaoshuo* writings provides more solid evidence that before the Tang, there were plenty of signs of deliberate fictionalization. Here I would like to analyze one tale, “The Girl Who Sells Powder 賣粉兒,” from the *Soushen ji*. The full text reads as follows:

Once upon a time, there was a wealthy family with an only son. He was very pampered and given unusual freedom. One day, while strolling in the market, he saw a beautiful girl selling foreign powder and fell in love with her. As he had no proper ways to express his love for her, he pretended to buy powder from her shop. Everyday, he went to her shop to buy powder and then left the shop after he got it. At first, the girl had nothing to say about his coming and going. As time went by, the girl became suspicious and her suspicions deepened day by day.

One day, when the boy came again, she asked him: “Sir, you buy this powder. How are you going to use it?”

The boy answered, “I have fallen in love with you. I did not dare express it to you. But I wanted to see you every day. So, I made the excuse of buying powder from you.”

Deeply moved, the girl promised to make a tryst with him. It would have to wait till the next evening. As evening fell the next day, the boy went to bed joyously in his room, waiting for the girl to come. By night, the girl came as promised. The boy was overwhelmed with joy. Holding her arms, he said, “My long-cherished wish has been fulfilled today.” He jumped with joy and unexpectedly died. The girl, terrified out of her wits, did not know what to do. So she fled from the room. The next day, she returned to the powder shop.

At breakfast time the following day, the boy's parents found it strange that he did not get up. They went to his bedroom to see him, only to find him dead in his bed. They laid his body in preparation for a funeral. Searching through their son's boxes, they found over a hundred bags of foreign powder. Some were packed in big bags, some in small bags. Altogether, the bags made a big pile. His mother speculated, "My son's death must have something to do with this powder." They then went to the market to buy all the available foreign powder. When they reached the girl's shop, they compared her powder with the powder found in their son's room. The two matched exactly. They therefore caught the girl and questioned her, "Why did you kill our son?"

Hearing their questioning, the girl burst into tears and told them the whole truth. The boy's parents did not believe her words and turned her in to the magistrate. The girl said, "I am no longer afraid to die, but I beg to see your son's body and mourn him to my heart's content." The county magistrate approved her request. The girl went straight to the boy's house. Holding his corpse with her hands, she wailed with deep sorrow. She moaned, "I did not expect bad luck to bring us to this pass. If your dead soul could show signs, what regrets do I have before I die?" All of a sudden, the boy came to life and retold the whole story. They became husband and wife and had many children thereafter.⁶³

The fictitious nature of this story is clear as daylight. It is, however, a realistic tale with lifelike characters and a credible plot, except for the detail of the dead boy's return to life. Even this unrealistic detail is not out of place in a love story. Indeed, it may be viewed as a surrealist or fantastic element, typical of many later stories in the Chinese tradition. In narrative technique, the story is quite sophisticated. It is narrated by an unobtrusive third-person narrator with cursory probing into the characters' mind. The boy's excuse, the girl's suspicion, the mother's speculation, the parental disbelief, and the use of temporal connectives—all are indicative of a unified creative vision, careful arrangement of details, and conscious intention to write an intriguing and credible tale. The ending is perhaps somewhat too abrupt. Otherwise, the tale would have been a perfect specimen of short realistic fiction with romantic elements. If it were placed into Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1351–53), a reader who has no previous knowledge of Boccaccio's story collection would mistake it for a tale produced in the romance tradition, the precursor of Western fiction.

As for its intentionality, there is little possibility that the author, whoever it was, intended to use it as a factual account for the transmission of extraordinary information. An educated guess would be that it was consciously intended to be an interesting love tale. In many other Six Dynasties tales, the characteristic features Lu Xun cited to describe the fiction of the Tang are all there. We may even say that many *zhiguai* and *zhiren* tales are already fictional works in the modern sense of the word, because they contain a kind

of literariness that does not come from their imitation of the world but emanates from language's self-referentiality. Paul de Man's observation about the relationship between literature and language representation may lend support to this claim:

Literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge "reality," but because it is not *a priori* certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are *like* (italics original) those, of the phenomenal world. It is therefore not *a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language.⁶⁴

Self-referentiality is a concept in postmodern literary theory. In some fantastic tales of the Six Dynasties, *xiaoshuo* writers seemed to have already become aware of it. "Yangxian shusheng" 陽羨書生 is a case in point. It tells of a character named Xu Yan. He meets a scholar on his way. Complaining of a hurt foot, the latter requests to be carried in Xu Yan's goose cage together with his two geese. Xu Yan takes it to be a joke, but the scholar goes into the cage. He does not dwindle in size, nor does the cage expand. The geese are not disturbed, and Xu Yan does not feel his load becomes heavier. When Xu Yan takes a rest, the scholar comes out of the cage and offers to entertain him. From his mouth he spits out a copper box, which holds all kinds of food and wine. After they drink and eat for some time, the scholar spits out a beautiful woman to keep them company. When the scholar becomes drunk and falls asleep, the woman spits out a young man from her mouth, who she says is her secret lover. When the scholar is about to awake, the woman spits out a tent, in which the scholar asks the woman to sleep with him. After both fall asleep, the second man reveals to Xu Yan that he himself has a secret love, and he spits out a young woman. She entertains the two men while they chat over wine. Hearing the scholar move in the tent, the second man swallows his woman in his mouth. The first woman comes out and swallows the second man in her mouth. When the scholar wakes up, he bids Xu Yan good-bye and swallows the first woman and all the utensils except a brass plate. He leaves the plate to Xu Yan as a souvenir.⁶⁵ I have omitted some details of the story. It is not just a tale about daydreams and secret desires. It is also an allegory about storytelling. The spitting out and swallowing of persons and things allegorically refers to the fabrication of fictional elements through language. Its fictionality is not only self-evident but also self-conscious.

In their study on the artistic history of Chinese fiction that I mentioned above, the authors, Meng and Ning, make a very meaningful distinction between myths and fables. According to them, "the fictionality of myths is unconsciously intended while that of fables is completed under self-conscious circumstances. It is the outcome of an intentional pursuit."⁶⁶ They correctly point out that the essential difference between myth and fable lies in a difference in compositional motive and textual effects. They further observe that "The fables in the philosophical writings of the pre-Qin eras were self-consciously

employed for the sake of debates and persuasion. In emplotment, characterization, and other aspects, they are consciously created, very mature, and therefore are endowed with a great deal of fictionality.”⁶⁷ Regrettably, when it comes to the question “When did the Chinese tradition start conscious fictional writing?” the authors retreat to the commonly accepted position first posited by Lu Xun.⁶⁸ They admit that there is conscious fictionality in the *zbiguai* tales of the Six Dynasties, but say it is very limited. Basing myself on the above conceptual inquiry and critical analysis, however, I think it reasonable to say that the scholarly consensus about the lack of conscious fiction making before the Tang is far too conservative and needs to be reconsidered and reevaluated.