A Comparative Study of Density and Fineness in the Narratives of Chinese and Western Classical Novels

Yanqiu ZHAO and Xu SUN

（Hunan Normal University，Changsha，Hunan，China；Xi'an International Studies University，Xi'an，Shaanxi，China）

Abstract：Density refers to the number of story elements within a narrative of a given piece of writing. Fineness refers to the sufficiency and inherent completeness of the story elements displayed. In comparison，the density of story elements in ancient Chinese novels is higher，and the fineness is lower，while the density of story elements in Western novels is lower and the fineness is higher. This difference partly contributes to the simplicity and refinement of the structure of Chinese novels and the complexity and delicate nature of the structure of Western novels. However，each of these characteristics has its strengths，in line with the national culture and social framework from which the Chinese and Western novels emerged. As such，these elements found in both Chinese and Western novels can appropriately reflect the way of life of their respective societies and the thoughts and feelings of the people therein，both of which are worthy of recognition.

Key Words：Chinese and Western novels；story elements；density；fineness；structure.

Author：Yanqiu ZHAO，Professor in the School of Chinese Language and Literature，Hunan Normal University；No. 36，Lushan South Rd.，Yuelu District，Changsha，Hunan，P. R. China，410081；Email：zhyq814@163. com；Xu SUN，Ph. D.，Associate Professor，School of Chinese Language and Literature，Xi'an International Studies University. Wenyuan South Rd.，Guodu Education Industrial Development Zone，Xi'an，Shaanxi，P. R. China，710128；Email：xu-sun@hotmail. com

According to the Dutch scholar L. K. Altes，one of the central aims of narratology is "to contribute to developing a historical，cultural，national，or international poetics" as "it should seek the commonalities and patterns that are present in many narrative works."[1] However，such commonalities and patterns exist both in the similarities and differences of many narrative works. Differences also imply commonness and patterns. With this context，it is as essential to explore the similarities as to analyze the differences. The structures of Chinese and Western novels created before the 19th century are identified as two uniquely different narrative systems that never，or very rarely，are intersected at other times，as evidenced by the stated differences between them in terms of narrative. Exploring these differences will help us understand and grasp these two forms of novels more deeply by carefully analyzing their shared commonalities and narrative patterns. The discussion conveyed in this paper is centered on the differences in density and fineness of story elements found in classical Chinese and Western novels.

---

〔1〕 L. K. Altes，"Literary Works，Values and Interpretive Frameworks：Challenges for Narratology，" translated by Yuanyuan，Research on Chinese Literature，No. 2，2018.

1. The Density and Fineness of the Novel

At the level of storytelling，the main elements of a novel are characters，plot，events，scenes，setting，and details. Of these six elements，the plot and setting areunable to be accurately measured or unable to be numerically measured，while the other four elements are countable. By uncountable，we mean that the two elements are a qualitative concept rather than a quantitative one. According to Prince，the plot has four meanings：1）The main event in a narrative，which is not a specific event but a structure of events where the central part has the characteristics of pyramid structure；2）The arrangement of events，through which the situation and events are presented to the reader；3）The general dynamic organization of narrative components，which is purposefully directed and forwarded，that facilitates the formation and expression of thematic interests or emotional effects；4）The narration of events that emphasize cause-and-effect relationships，where the events narrated in a temporal chain are only stories and those narrated in a causal chain become episodes.[2] In either sense，the plot is not like a character，a specific individual with clear motivations and connotations，but rather a relationship or structure. The setting is similar in this regard. It is generally considered as to be "the objective conditions that shape the characters' personalities and motivate them to act."[3] As such，this element can be divided into two parts：social setting and natural setting. However，although the setting is critical in novels，it is still a qualitative rather than quantitative conceptualization，and its extension and boundaries are unclear，lacking formal prescriptiveness. In some novels，the setting even fails to exist concretely but is only indirectly implied through character actions and character relationships. In this regard，we can only say that there is a setting description here，identified in terms of the description of the setting or what aspects of the setting description are involved. Yet，for researchers studying this element，it is often difficult to describe the setting in specific quantities as characters do.

Among the other four elements，characters are the most countable，and their extension and boundaries are so clear that we can easily and conveniently state their numbers in concrete figures. The extension and limits of the other three elements of events，scenes，and details are not as definitive as those of characters. Still，the difficulty in determining them lies mainly in the hierarchy by which by which they are defined and not in their lack of transparent extension and boundaries. For example，there are significant events，medium events，minor events，and under-minor events in a novel. There can also be a further delineation of this element in a novel，such as sub-events，micro-events，etc. To count the number of events present，we first need to determine the hierarchy at play and，once the hierarchy is determined，we can accurately account for all events in the given novel. However，it should also be acknowledged that the extension and boundaries of the events themselves are still clear；if the hierarchy is appropriately determined，it is still relatively easy to decide on and count the events in question.

The countability of scenes is roughly the same as events，and there is also an issue with

---

〔2〕　Prince，G. A Dictionary of Narratology. University of Nebraska Press，2003，p. 169.

〔3〕　童庆炳 TONG Qingbing 主编：《文学理论教程》Wenxue lilun jiaocheng［A Course in Literary Theory］，北京 Beijing：高等教育出版社 Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe［Higher Education Press］，1998 年版，第 191 页.

hierarchy at play regarding this element. After the hierarchy is determined,it is not difficult to define and calculate the specific number of scenes present in a novel. Details,on the other hand,prove to be more of a complicated challenge. Details by nature are dependent on characters,events,scenes,and form meaningful narrative units through their combination with these three essential elements. There are also details of different sizes,but they do not have the same complex hierarchical relationship as events and scenes. Even if there is a hierarchy with more details,there are usually only one or two layers,unlike those used in the counting of events or scenes,which are distinguished into several layers. The size of details mainly refers to the involvement and richness of the descriptions,not to the unity of the interactions. With fewer or no hierarchical layers,the extension and boundaries of details are more precise than those of events and scenes,and calculations and statistics are relatively easier to determine. Let's take these four elements with the ultimate goal of countability as the object of study,especially the three elements of characters,events,and scenes. We can determine that the number of elements and the sufficiency and completeness of the elements displayed are inversely proportional within a certain length. We use density and fineness to refer to these two phenomena, respectively.

By density,we mean the number of elements in a given space. Density is a concept of quantity, not a concept of category. In other words,density does not involve the type of elements,but the number of them included within a narrative of a specified length. To say that a particular work has a low density of elements is not to say that it lacks such elements as characters,events,scenes,details, etc. Rather, this assessment acknowledges that the total number of certain important types of elements is low. For example,suppose 30 characters appear in a novel of 300,000 words,and only ten characters appear in another novel of the same length. The density of characters in the former novel is higher than that in the latter. This is expressed by the formula:30(characters)/300,000(words): 10(characters)/300,000(words). According to this calculation,the character density of the former novel is three times higher than the latter. Events,scenes,and details can also be calculated in this way. The density of characters,events,scenes,and details is somehow intrinsically related to each other,but this connection itself is not fixed,let alone proportional. Because fiction writing is a kind of free and creative activity,the author may set up characters,events,scenes,and details exactly as they need to conceive and express them for their intended purpose. Thus,a novel may have a certain balance in the number of characters,events,scenes,and details to produce a particular connection and form a specific positive proportional relationship.

Likewise,the author of a novel may opt to break the balance in the number of these four elements so that each component is on its own in terms of quantity or even deliberately formed to further highlight an anti-proportional relationship. The former example,such as the case with the typified historical novel,generally sets up a more significant number of characters,events,and scenes to express the complexity and depth of history. Here,balance is formed among the three elements. The latter example,such as the Tramp Novel,consists of a single character throughout the novel. There may be many events,scenes,and details at play throughout the narrative,but only a handful of characters. Of course,there may also be cases where there are few scenes. Still,many events and characters,such as a novel that adopts a more pronounced dramatic writing style or the phenomenon of a few events,but many scenes and characters are often found in novels with slow plot progression.

In short，among Chinese and Western novels，it is possible to find a large number of works in which characters，events，scenes，and details are balanced，as well as a large number of works where these same elements are positioned in an unbalanced way.

Fineness is a self-created term in this paper，referring to the sufficiency and inherent completeness of story elements within a narrative. By adequacy，we mean that each part of the element is tangible and easily identifiable，with clear images and prominent features；by inner completeness，we suggest that the element has all the essential parts it should have and that each part is interconnected to form an organic and comprehensive whole. Sufficiency and inner completeness complement each other，and they cooperate to constitute the novel's fineness. If there is only sufficiency but not enough inner completeness，the element's image itself will be mutilated，just like a person who is legless，whose body is incomplete. However，his features are regular，and his body is sturdy. If there is only inner completeness，but not enough sufficiency，the image of the element itself will be muted and dry：although the body is intact，flesh and blood are not fully present，and the remanent skin and bones fail to fully arouse the reader's interest. Of course，the more sufficiency and completeness present equates to a better degree of fineness in the novel. Fineness does not exist alone in the novel but is closely related to the other comprehensive parts and elements making up the whole.

The degree of fineness present is primarily determined by the novel's overall concept，the need to express the theme，and the position and role of the elements in the novel. A secondary character，for example，does not need to be more detailed than the main character. But，on the other hand，suppose the secondary character were to be more thoroughly described than the main character，with a complete set of factors. In this case，there is a possibility that the secondary character could potentially take over the role of the main character in the novel，and，to a larger extent，this would not be a good thing in terms of the novel as a fully formed work. But，of course，this is not to say that the secondary character could not be better than the main character.

In some cases，they may be more compelling than the main characters due to several factors designed by the author in their ultimate portrayal. For example，the character ofSeth Pecksniff in Charles Dickens's Martin Chuzzlewit is not the main character of the novel. Still，his portrayal of hypocrisy as the core character is so vivid that it far surpasses the novel's main characters，such as Little Martin Jr. and Tom Pinch. Seth Pecksniff as a character has received readers' and critics' attention and，accordingly，has become the representative of a class of figures within the novel. As it can be seen，although there is a connection between the fineness and the consequent success of the elements，this does not necessarily mean that the higher the fineness，the better it is. Fineness refers to the sufficiency of the holistic presentation of the elements in question and the completeness of each necessary part of the elements themselves. In this way，success refers to the perfection，representativeness，and novelty of both the content and form of the elements，which are not automatically at the same level.

On the other hand，there is a degree of fineness and completeness determined by the author's overall conception and the full effect of the work as a whole. This is also the case with the individual elements themselves. Unnecessarily increasing the fineness of the elements does not necessarily increase the success of the elements. Nor do elements with low fineness necessarily succeed more

than elements with high fineness. Fundamentally, literature is a system. Any element is defined by how it operates within that system, and none can stand alone without that essential context.

Density and fineness are perpetually in conflict. To have a high degree of fineness means the various parts of the utilized elements must be unfolded, thus requiring more overall length. However, the size of a novel is always limited. To increase the fineness of the elements within a certain length, the density of the elements must be reduced, and most novels cannot achieve both effects simultaneously at the same time. Furthermore, although various writers have their own considerations and different characteristics in dealing with the density and fineness of these story elements, writers of the same era, nationality, country, and region have certain commonalities in dealing with them. These shared similarities likewise frame the authors' unique differences with writers of other eras, nationalities, countries, and regions. The Chinese and Western novels were written before the 19th century developed independently, at different times, and in varying places with little crossover. As such, they also present different characteristics in the density and fineness of their elements. A comparative study will help deepen our understanding of the individualized characteristics of Chinese and Western novels.

2. Density in the Narratives of Chinese and Western Novels

The terminology of Chinese and Western novels mentioned throughout this paper refers to classical Chinese and Western Novels. As far as China is concerned, it mainly refers to the Chinese novels written before 1894. After the first Sino-Japanese War, Chinese intellectuals were directly influenced by a wave of learning initiated from the West. During this time, a large volume of Western literary themes, ideas, and works entered China and influenced both Chinese authors and their consequent novels. The narrative of Chinese novels gradually converged with the narrative structure found within Western novels, distancing itself from the narratives of classical Chinese novels, and no longer lends itself to a distinctive narrative comparison, through differences, with Western novels. Of course, if one were to be more rigorous in their analysis, this point of convergence could easily be traced back to the First Opium War in 1840. In fact, even before this point in time, the shift toward a more Western literary trend had already begun. However, the changes during this period were first in the material sphere, influencing areas of the social order, including the military and economy. Concerning the spiritual sphere, emphasized by cultural tenets including literature and art, the Western influence emerged at a slower pace, so traditional Chinese culture remained stable during this period. The Chinese novel was then allowed to continue in its individualized state of development on its original track due to its strong inertia. Therefore, within the scope of this paper, the Chinese novels written between 1840 and 1894 are still classified under the scope of classical Chinesenovels but are minimally involved in the overt comparison. As a counterpart, the classical Western novels in this paper mainly refer to the Western novels created from the periods of the Renaissance to the 19th century. In this context, the Western novels of the 19th century mainly refer to Western romantic and realistic novels. Naturalistic novels can be included, but modernist novels, such as those predominantly focused on aestheticism and symbolism are not included. Overall, one of the general

characteristics of the treatment of story elements in Chinese and Western novels is the lower density of novel elements in Western novels and the higher density of novel elements found in Chinese novels.

The Western novel's ancient source is easily identified as mythology and epic poetry, while its modern forerunner is the tramp novel. Ancient Greek mythology is mature mythology, where gods and humans are portrayed as homogeneous, with vividly rich examples of details, characters, events, and scenes depicted expansively. Ancient Greek epics, as well as medieval epics, often revolve around significant characters chanted repeatedly. For example, the Homeric epic of theIliad chants Achilles' wrath, and the Odyssey narrates the return of Odysseus with story elements that are likewise presented in detail. Compared with Chinese mythology and historical biography, these two elements are relatively less dense and more detailed. The tramp novel arose in 16th century Spain. The earliest tramp novel is The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes: His Fortunes and Adversities (1554), and other Western novels of the 16th, 17th, and even 18th centuries—such as Cervantes's Don Quixote, François Rabelais' Gargantua and Pantagruel, Lesage's Gil Blas, Fielding's The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling, and some of Charles Dickens's novels such as The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club, The Orphan of the Mist, and Oliver Twist; or, the Parish Boy's Progress—all have the characteristics of tramp novels or are directly influenced by them. The tramp novel is a series of stories based on the main character's experiences. The characters show their characteristics and form their depicted images, usually composed with few characters and more fully displayed events and scenes. According to Mai Yongxiong:

In terms to the art form, the dominant structure of most narrative works of the early and Mid-Western period, including the evolution from epic poetry, the acts of the apostles, and chivalric sagas to tramp novels, is the single-line development of the plot and the journey pattern of the main protagonist. Although such an art form seems rather sloppy and naïve today, it allowed the writer to narrate the story very conveniently. This involves laying out the plot naturally, expanding the space systematically, and adapting to the traditional reading and reception psychology of Western readers before the modernist literature became popular. [4]

This assertion is valid. However, it should be noted that this structure feature has not affected the density of story elements in Western novels. For example, the tramp novel generally has few characters and less complex events and scenes, so the density of theseelements is not high. This is clear if we compare the examples of Don Quixote, Gargantua, and Pantagruel, Gil Blas, The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling, Water Margin, and Journey to the West. After the 18th century, Western novels matured and became more colorful in their narratives. Still, the characteristic of the prevalence of a lower density of elements of the novel did not reverse outright but was instead strengthened.

---

[4] 麦永雄 MAI Yongxiong：“西方流浪汉小说传统与特征简论” Xifang liulanghan xiaoshuo chuantong yu tezheng jianlun ［“A Brief Discussion of the Tradition and Characteristics of Western Vagabond Fiction，”］，《广西师范大学学报》 Guangxi shifan daxue xuebao ［Journal of Guangxi Normal University］，1994 年第 4 期 ［No. 4，1994. ］

For example, Balzac's novel, Old Goriot, is about 300,000 words and only describes four main characters: Rastignac, Goriot, Madame Vauquer, and Vautrin. Only a few secondary characters are included, such as Madame de Beauséant, Nucingen, Victorine Taillefer, Anastasie de Restaud, Delphine de Nucingen. In terms of events, as the titles of the six chapters suggest, the novel concentrates only on the Bourbon Restoration, Rastignac's first visit to Paris, the life of the Goriot and his two daughters, Rastignac's visits to Madame de Beauséant, Madame de Restaud, and Madame de Nucingen, Vautrin and his advice to Rastignac, and the death of old Goriot. The scenes are mainly focused on the mansion Vauquer, the mission of the Viscountess of Beauséant, the mansion of the Countess of Restaud, and the mansion of Nucingen. For a work of 300,000 words, the density of these elements is relatively low.

Chinese novels are entirely different. The ancient origins of Chinese novels are mythology and historical biography, to which the genre of fables can also be added. Later, two lines of development emerged: the Chinese literary novel and the vernacular novel. The direct source of the Chinese literary novel is historical biography, which developed in the Wei and Jin dynasties when Zhiren(志人) and zhiguai（志怪）appeared, and in the Tang dynasty when the legends appeared. Tang legends are the symbol of the formal formation of ancient Chinese novels. The direct source of vernacular novels is Huaben(话本) in the Song and Yuan dynasties, followed by the Ming and Qing dynasties with the development of the novel in chapters(章回小说 Zhnaghui Xiaoshuo). The novel in chapters is arguably the highest achievement of the ancient Chinese novel. Unlike the examples of sprawling Greek mythology, Chinese myths are primarily short, with dense characters, events, scenes, and less details. The situation is more or less the same for fables, historical biographies, and mystery novels. Most of the fables consist of short stories, with one illustrating a truth. Sima Qian's Records of the Grand Historian（史记 Shiji）is the most representative of the historical biographies and has had the most significant influence on Chinese fiction. Many chapters in this work are vividly recounted, with strong images and stories. In terms of elements, the density tends to be very high. "Hongmen banquet" involves more than ten characters, some of which were described in detail, such as Xiang Yu, Liu Bang, Fan Zeng, Zhang Liang, Xiang Bo, Fan Kuai, with the events depicted following each other. However, the whole piece in its entirety is less than 2,000 words. With such a small total word count, the density of elements here is very high. The high density is also evident in Zhiren and Zhiguai novels. In Liu Yiqing's A New Account of the Tales of the World(世说新语 Shisuo Xinyu), a character or an explanation of a given event is often brought to life in just tens or hundreds of words. The Classic of the Mountains and Seas（山海经 Shan Hai Jing）describes all kinds of events and scenes, each having an average of only a few dozen words. The characters, events, settings, and details in Huaben and the novel in chapters are much more detailed, taking up much more space and total word counts than those in historical biographies, and Zhiren/Zhiguai novels are still portrayed in a dense state.

Take Dream of the red chamber （红楼梦 Honglou Meng）as an example of this trend. According to Xu Gongshi's statistics, the novel was written with a total of 975 characters. Among them, the original branch of the Ning and Rong houses: 16 men and 11 women; dependents: 31 women. Jia family: 34 Men and 8 women. Jia in-laws: 52 men and 43 women. The servants of two houses: 73 maids and 125 servants, 67 male servants, 27 squeaky. The members of the Royal family: 9 men, 6

women；27 eunuchs，7 palace ladies. The number of titles：37 males and 14 dependents. Officials at all levels：26 people who have both names and positions，38 people who have positions but no names，and 3 people of Xuxue. Social Figures：102 men and 71 women；14 doctors and 10 retainers；6 eunuchs and 17 women；17 monks and 49 nuns；4 Lianzong men and 4 women. Foreigners：2 women. Land of Illusion（Taixu Huanjing 太虚幻境）：6 men，19 women. Total：975 people，including 495 men and 480 women；732 people with names，243 people without names.

Likewise，the number of events in the novel is not to be underestimated. There are 17 descriptions of birthday alone，including six of them described in detail（the 11th chapter：the birthday of Jia Jing；the 22nd chapter：the birthday of Bao Chai；the 26th chapter：the birthday of Xue Pan；the 43rd chapter：the birthday of Wang Xifeng；the 62nd chapter：the birthday of Baoyu；the 71st chapter：the birthday of Jia Mu）. There are also five brief descriptions（the 16th chapter：the birthday of Jia Zheng；the 29th chapter：the birthday of Xue Pan；the 70th chapter：the birthday of Tanchun；the 85th chapter：the birthday of Daiyu；the 108th chapter：the birthday of Baochai）. There are six examples just mentioned in passing（the 2nd chapter：Ja Zheng's first birthday；the 25th chapter：Wang Ziteng's wife's birthday；the 36th chapter：Aunt Xue's birthday；the 52nd chapter：Prince Teng's birthday；the 57th chapter：Aunt Xue's birthday；the 85th chapter：the King of Bei Jing's birthday）. Other events such as Baochai chases butterflies，Daiyu buries flowers，Ping'er wields considerable power，Miaoyu serves tea，Yuanchun visits relatives，Xifeng makes power，Xichun paints garden，Yingchun prays，Xiangyun's tipsy asleep，Qiaojie avoids trouble，Liwan lectures son，Yuanyang resists marriage，Tanchun runs poetry association，Qingwen rips fans，Granny Liu visits the Grand View Garden three times，Lin Daiyu visits the Rongguo Mansion，Yuanyang three declares the rules in the game of forfeits，etc. The list of events included here is also endless. Other chapter novels such as Water Margin，Romance of the Three Kingdoms，and Journey to the West are similar in their extensive depictions. Water Margin consists of one hundred and twenty chapters，including 108 hero characters with no less than 100 characters in opposition to them. There are no fewer than 200 characters with names in the whole novel. Journey to the West describes the 91 difficulties of the monk Tang Sanzang and his disciplines，and at least 25 stories are included detailing each in the consequent writing.

The same level of description is evident in the structure of Chinese literary novels. The Fighting Cricket（Cu Zhi 促织），a short story from The Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio（Liaozhai Zhiyi 聊斋志异）is one such example where the whole novel revolves around the cricket with no less than 2,000 characters. It is also dense with events，such as the recruitment of the cricket，search for the cricket，catching the cricket，death of the cricket，getting another cricket，cricket fighting，tributing of the cricket，location of cricket fighting，the voice of the cricket by Cheng Ming's son，using the cricket to make a fortune，and the discussion of the cricket. This series of events followed by other events were designed to make the reader aware of what has happened in minute detail. The unique main characters are Cheng Ming，Cheng's wife，Cheng's son，and the cricket transformed by the spirit of Cheng's son. Although only focused on four characters，the density is not very low for a novel of fewer than 2,000 words.

The high density of story elements is conducive to expressing more social content within a given or limited space，reflecting the broad picture of life. However，a density that is too high will also

affect the development of specific elements and, to some extent, affect the performance of the elements themselves, ultimately affecting the reader's grasp of the elements of the story. Therefore, there is a degree of density control that is optimal and required. Ancient Chinese novelists tend to have a loose understanding of this particular degree. In contrast, Western novelists tend to have a tighter grasp, resulting in the different characteristics of narrative density in Chinese and Western novels.

3. The Fineness in the Narrative of Chinese and Western Novels

In contrast to density, the fineness of story elements is higher in Western novels but lower in Chinese novels. Western novels have fewer story elements, and, as such, more space is allocated to each element wherein the elements are displayed and represented more fully. The main characters of Goethe'sThe Sorrows of Young Werther are Werther and Charlotte, and the only one focused on in detail is Werther. As a result, Werther is portrayed with a high degree of detail. His family background, experience, character, psychology, happiness, sadness, conflict, and struggle during his relationship with Charlotte and the psychological processing behind his final act of suicide are all written with great focus and attention to minute details. The novel's events revolve around Werther's love affair with Charlotte and the theme of the loss of love. To escape the pain of lost love, Werther takes refuge in the scenic countryside to escape the pain of lost love, where he meets Charlotte, and they fall in love. However, Charlotte is already engaged, and she chooses the former lover based on propriety and love. Werther eventually must leave to work in an embassy, then ultimately resigns to live in the Marquis' home for a while. In the end, he cannot stop missing and longing for Charlotte, so he returns to that small village, only to discover that Charlotte is already married. Werther confesses his love to Charlotte once again and finally kills himself with her husband's pistol. The novel's plot is relatively simple, and the number of events depicted is not too great in terms of their number. The novel can be described from many aspects. For example, the chapters titled "December 20," "Alma," "Lino," and "Alpin" are about the last meeting between Werther and Charlotte. Charlotte blamed Werther for breaking their agreement and coming before Christmas Eve. Werther reads her a poem by Ossian, and their emotions break through the propriety of reason as they embrace each other passionately. Charlotte leaves Werther and locks herself in her room, refusing to open the door. Werther likewise ultimately leaves. The four chapters focus on their meeting to pave the way for their psychological changes, just as the novel has Werther read and reference much of Ossian's poetry, preparing the way for the climax of his and Charlotte's love.

Similarly, Hugo's novels are magnificent, portraying sprawling and delicate characters, events, and scenes. This is related to the low density of story elements in his novels, thus allowing him to describe the elements in focused detail. The Chinese version ofNotre Dame de Paris is about 400,000 words, but the main characters in the novel are Esmeralda, Claude, and Quasimodo. With the addition of the secondary characters Gangoire, Fabi, and Esmeralda's mother, there are only six important and relatively important characters. The scenes mainly revolve around Notre Dame and the surrounding area. The most critical events are Esmeralda performing in the square and being robbed at night,

Gangowa entering the Kingdom of miracles by mistake，Quasimodo being punished in the square，Esmeralda giving him water to drink，Esmeralda having an affair with Fabi，and being executed as a witch，Quasimodo rescuing Esmeralda and taking her to Notre Dame，the vagrants attacking Notre Dame，Claude coveting Esmeralda and leaving her to the hermit nun. The latter is also her birth mother，Esmeralda recognizing her mother and dying in the square，and Quasimodo pushing Claude to his death from the top of Notre Dame's bell tower. The small number of elements allows the novel to concentrate on the description of the elements themselves. For example，the detailed description of Notre Dame in Notre Dame de Paris could be compared to Balzac's Vauquer Maison in Old Goriot. The images of Esmeralda，Quasimodo，Claude，and others are well presented and rich in detail. The various aspects of their character are shown not through the narrator's introduction but the characters' words，actions，and specific interactions with each other and their environment. Esmeralda，in particular，is like a three-dimensional relief，with every aspect of the image highlighted，distinct and vivid in her personalized authenticity.

In contrast，while the density of story elements in Chinese novels is higher than in Western novels，the fineness of story elements in Chinese novels is much lower. For example，the Water Margin has 108 hero characters and another 100 less famous characters with names. More than half of the hero characters have their individual stories，while other characters such as Gao Qiu，Wang Qing，and Fang La also have their own stories，making the novel very rich in events. Although the scenes are centered in Shandong，they are very complicated because of the many characters and circumstances involved，with many characters engaging in necessary actions and pivotal events occurring in different locations. Also，because of this degree of represented events taking place，the fineness of characters in Water Margin is relatively low. When compared to Western novel characters such as Goethe's Werther，Fielding's Tom Jones，Walter Scott's Ivanhoe，Balzac's Old Goriot and Rastignac，Charles Dickens's David Copperfield，and Tolstoy's Nekhlyudoff and Anna Karenina，the most complex characters in this work，such as Wu Song，Song Jiang，Lin Chong，and Lu Zhishen，are marked by a much lower degree of fineness. This trend is mainly manifested into two aspects. The first is that most of these characters are portrayed in detail only at a particular stage of the story，after which they die or fade away from roles of prominence. The second is that the subtlety of these characters is not sufficient. Psychological descriptions are generally absent or not detailed. The characters' full descriptions are relatively rough，generally depicted through their words，actions，and performance in numerous events to shape their image for the reader. This directly contrasts the detailed description of the character's multiple sides and perspectives portrayed in Western novels to shape their holistic image.

Furthermore，Wu Song is one such character whose portrayal is shaped by his performance in a series of events. This includes meeting Song Jiang，slaying the tiger on the mountain，meeting Wu da，killing Jin Lian in anger，being friendly to Zhang Qing and Shi En，drunkenly beating the Jiang Mensheng，wreaking havoc in Flying Cloud Pool（飛雲浦 Fei Yun Pu），killing Zhang Du Jian in anger，walking on Centipede Ridge（蜈蚣嶺 Wu Gong Ling）at night，and opposing the recruitment. In Western novels，such as Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther，Werther's image is mainly portrayed through his variety of performances connected to his love affair with Charlotte.

Continuing this marked difference，the characters within Chinese novels are often distinct and

vivid but not complex enough. The dual personality found in characters that often appear in 19th-century Western novels, multifaceted characters like Nekhlyudoff and Rastignac, are seldom seen in Chinese works likeWater Margin. Song Jiang has some dual personalities, but they are not typical and often fail to develop fully. This has to do with the fineness of the individual and collective story elements. Due to the lack of fineness, the novel reveals the characters' outstanding points. Still, it ignores the complicated entanglement between those elements of the character him or herself, resulting in the lack of diversity and duality. The same is true of events and scenes. The storyline of Wu Song and others progresses quickly, with numerous events and scenes, so the degree of fineness is relatively low. For example, a shocking event, Wu Song's wreaking havoc in Flying Cloud Pool (飛雲浦 Fei Yun Pu), is only three natural paragraphs in length, less than a thousand words. At the same time, the real fight scenes are only a paragraph or approximately 300 words. The descriptions of specific scenes are also straightforward, such as the description of Flying Cloud Pool: "in front came a Flying Cloud Pool, surrounded by the wild Port wide river. Five people walk to a broad board bridge, an archway with a plate reading 'Flying Cloud Pool.'"〔5〕Comprised of just a few words, this descriptor was written out of the momentum of Flying Cloud Pool and the fighting environment. The details of Water Margin are also concise, generally capturing the main points or broad strokes of context and representation. There's a lot to be said for the famous event wherein Lu Zhishen punches Zheng Guanxi, utilizing just three punches to end a life, and this action could easily be written to include many things in detail. However, this example of the Chinese novel and this specific scene is mainly fastened to the effects of the punches themselves to narrate the plot and appropriately render apt metaphors. Although the details are focused, in this way, they are still clean and sharp.

It should be noted that the fineness ofWater Margin is representative of the narrative forms employed by ancient Chinese novels. The fineness of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo Yanyi 三国演义), Journey to the West(Xi You Ji 西游记), and further back to huaben(话本) in the Song and Yuan dynasties to works such as "Sanyan and Er'pai"(三言二拍), include details of shared story elements that are similar to those at work in Water Margin. The Chinese literary novels such as Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio (liaozhai zhiyi 聊斋志异) and New Stories Told While Trimming the Wick (Jiandeng Xinhua 剪灯新话) are a bit less detailed in comparison. The origin of vernacular novels is "shuohua"(说话) and "Huaben"(话本) composed during the Song dynasty, which is more casual, spacious, and detailed than written language. Therefore, compared with the Chinese literary novels, which originated from the historical biographies and the Zhiren/Zhiguai novels, vernacular novels are generally more detailed than Chinese literary novels. Among the vernacular novels, Dream of Red Chamber(Hong Lou Meng 红楼梦) and The Plum in the Golden Vase (Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅) are relatively more detailed. However, there is still a certain distance at play in the representations compared with Western novels. This is clear by comparing the characters, events, and scenes in Dream of Red Chamber with Tolstoy's War and Peace. Of course, there is no necessary connection between fineness and the overall success of the story elements in a particular novel. Many factors determine the success of elements, and fineness is just one of them. Other factors

〔5〕 施耐庵 SHI Nai'an、罗贯中 LUO Guanzhong:《水浒传》Shuihuzhuan〔The Water Margin〕上册 Shangce〔first volume〕,北京 Beijing:中华书局 Zhonghua shuju〔Zhonghua Book Company〕,2009 年,第 259-260 页.

also play an important role in the success of the elements. For example, if a character is a secondary character in work, then a high degree of detail will not progress the character forward. Instead, when too much description is spent on the character directly, the secondary character supersedes the primary one.

On the other hand, the eventual success of characters also depends on the characters' articulated characteristics, the profundity and novelty of their lived reflections, and their conformity and measuring up with the times and events depicted. If there is not enough attention concentrated on these factors and only work done focusing on the degree of details by the author, the character will never be entirely successful. The key to the success of Lun Xu's Ah Q（阿 Q 正传）is not in its fineness, but in the description of each of the characters' distinctive personalities and unique experiences, each of which expresses a universal phenomenon in the human spiritual life——the method of spiritual victory and what is contained in every character's heart but not necessarily in every author's pen. In terms of fineness, Wu Song in Water Margin is not as evidently established as the eponymous protagonist in Walter Scott's historical novel Ivanhoe. However, in terms of the success of the image, Wu Song is not perceived as lower than Ivanhoe but, in some senses, even higher. Although both novels are good at portraying characters through action, the image of Wu Song is more distinct and his personality more prominent than that of Ivanhoe. The same is true of the details in each of the novels. In terms of adequacy of presentation, there is also a question of the fineness of more information, where the finer does not always equate to better. Concerning the detailed description of ingesting gold, Mr. Ma'er's two fingers in Unofficial History of the Scholars (Ruilin Waishi 儒林外史) is not depicted as inferior to Grandet's death in Eugénie Grandet. Although in terms of the adequacy of the presentation, the former is less refined than the latter. It follows that fineness and density are critical quantitative measures of story elements but not as crucial as quality criteria. They indicate the characteristics of the novel's narrative but are not the criteria for determining the novel's narrative success.

4. The Difference Effect of Fineness and Density on the Structure of Chinese and Western Novels

The structure is the organization and form of existence for the content of a novel. "The structure of a narrative work is the overall form of the relationship between the components or units of the work. "[6] Thus, the content of a novel is the story. The elements of a story constitute the "components and units" of the novel, and the form of organization between the elements embodies the novel's structure. As for constructs like an idea or theme, it can only be expressed through characters, events, plots, scenes, settings, details, etc. Therefore, although story elements are parts of the novel's content, they cannot constitute the structure itself.

There is a difference between simplicity and complexity, refinement, and delicacy, in structure. From the perspective of narrative, the simplicity and complexity and refinement and delicacy of the

---

〔6〕 童庆炳 TONG Qingbing 主编：《文学理论教程》Wenxue lilun jiaocheng［A Course in Literary Theory］，Beijing：高等教育出版社 Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe［Higher Education Press］，1998 年版，第 215 页.

structure are closely related to the density and fineness of story elements. Only when the story elements are fully developed can the story's narrative have the room and space required to move, change,and adequately deploy. If such progressions of the narrative are frequent and intense, the structure of the work is likely to be complicated. On the other hand, the work structure will be refined if the deployments are regular,strong,coordinated,and clever. On the contrary,if the density of story elements is high and the number of elements is large, the novel's structure tends to be simplistic and concise.

Tolstoy's novels are known for their elaborate and refined structure. HisWar and Peace is a rare epic work that reflects all aspects of Russian society between 1805 and 1820 through the alternation of periods of violence and civility,based on the experiences of the four prominent members of five Russian aristocratic families—the Bezukhovs,the Bolkonskys,the Rostovs,the Kuragins,and the Drubetskoys. Anna Karenina takes the tragedy of Anna and Levin's spiritual exploration as the threads of the story. At the same time,Oblonsky acts as an intermediary,interweaving the two unrelated threads into an organic whole,forming the famous "dome structure." Resurrection takes the spiritual degeneration and resurrection of Nekhlyudov and Maslova as two clues and uses the dichotomy to express the sharp social contradictions in Russia and the journey of each characters' spiritual resurrection in the 19th century. The structure of each of the three novels is distinctive,but all are elaborate and refined. This is related to the lower density and higher fineness of the story elements in the three novels. Although all three works are enormous masterpieces,the density of story elements is much lower. The fineness is much higher than classical Chinese novels such as Water Margin,Romance of the Three Kingdoms,Journey to the West,Dream of the Red Chamber, and others. War and Peace is an epic and far-reaching novel that contains 559 characters,with an impressive cast of about thirty or so main characters,including Andrei Bolkonsky,Pierre Bezukhov, Natasha Rostova,Nikolenka Rostov,Hélène Kuragina,Napoléon,and others. This is relatively rare in western novels,but the density of characters is still lower when compared with Chinese novels such as Romance of the Three Kingdoms and Dream of the Red Chamber. Of these two works,there are no less than 1,000 characters with names in the former and 732 characters with names of the 975 total characters in the latter. Still,despite these vast numbers of depicted characters,both of these Chinese novels are shorter in length than War and Peace.

The density and fineness of story elements affect the structure of the novel in two aspects. One aspect is the presentation of the story elements themselves. Suppose the density of story elements is low and the fineness is high. In that case,the space allocated to each element is relatively sufficient, and the elements themselves are displayed in adequate and proportionate detail. When the elements are presented with sufficient detail,it is easier to increase the variation in the narrative process,adopt more narrative styles,and change the narrative order more frequently.

On the other hand,the other aspect is the organization and connection between story elements. If there are many elements,the work focuses on the organization and association of the elements；if there are few elements,the work focuses on how the elements are organized and connected. For example,in Tolstoy'sResurrection,he started the story with Nechlyudov at first,but he felt that it was not a good way to create the narrative as it was hypocritical. As Tolstoy himself stated：

When I was working on the children's storyWho Was Right? I understood it. I realized that we should start with the lives of the peasants，who are the main characters，the positive ones，while everything else is a shadow，the negative. The same is true of Resurrection，which should start with her.[7]

The "her" in this specific case means Maslova. As such，if the narrative is to start with Maslova，everything will be fine. However，Maslova is a secondary character when compared to Nechlydov. This is because the spiritual resurrection of Nechlydov is the main story of the novel. In contrast，Maslova's spiritual resurrection is secondary and subordinate to the resurrection of Nekhlyudoff from the holistic framing of the novel. This caused two most remarkable features withinResurrection：the flashback beginning and the double-line structure. Here，one is obvious，and the other is hidden. This structural form of Resurrection is related to the fact that the novel's main characters are only two people，Nechlydov and Maslova，and the density of events and scenes is relatively low. The lower density provides the basis and conditions for the organization and connection of the elements. If this were to be framed like Romance of the Three Kingdoms，with time spans of more than 100 years，with more than 1，000 characters，no less than 50 main characters，and numerous events and scenes，there would necessarily be less effort put into the question of "how" to organize and connect the story elements in such a novel. Because of this，Tolstoy managed and connected the story elements into an organic whole，avoiding many potential issues. Therefore，the four major novels of ancient China，Three Kingdoms，Water Margin，Journey to the West，and The Red Chamber，are all organized and connected by time clues. One of the crucial reasons for this is that the density of the story elements is too high. The density is so high that it brings significant challenges to the organization and connection of the elements. Therefore，the easiest and safest way to organize and connect the elements is to arrange them one by one according to the chronological order and the sequence of events，thus creating a structure of the work which tends to be concise.

On the contrary，with fewer elements，Western novels do not need to worry about mixing and entangling individual elements and have more flexibility to do something in regards to the structure of the novel itself，such as using the methods of flashback，collage，skip，multi-line narrative，etc.，thus further making the structure of these works both complicated and exquisite. For example，Romance of the Three Kingdoms in which Guan Yunchang rides thousands of miles alone，travels past five passes，beheads six generals，addresses more than twenty named characters，engages in five major events，observes Cao Cao's sending off，Liao Hua's offering of a sister-in-law，Huhua's hospitable service，and Sun Qian's letter—comprises a total of nine events and more than twenty scenes，but is written in less than six thousand words to finish the narration in one chapter. On average，each character is depicted in less than 300 words and each event in about 600 words. With such density，even a master of structure like Tolstoy could only organize the story's elements in chronological order and the development of events. In a novel like Romance of the Three Kingdoms，if too much attention is paid to the elaborate structure，the result may be a tangle of story elements

〔7〕《列夫·托尔斯泰论创作》Liefu Tuoersitai lun chuangzuo ［Lev Tolstoy on Creative Writing］，戴启篁 DAI Qihuang 译，桂林 Guilin：漓江出版社 Lijiang chubanshe ［Lijiang Publishing House］，1982 年，第 171 页.

and a lack of clarity in the narrative.

Naturally, there are Chinese novels with more elaborate and sophisticated structures. For example, Han Bangqing's The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai(海上花列传 Haishanghua Liezhuan)is one such novel that consists of many interconnected but independent stories. However, its story units do not move forward one by one, as in the case of Unofficial History of the Scholars (儒林外史 Rulin Waishi) and Water Margin, with one story progressing after another. Instead, the novel breaks each story unit into individual pieces and then reassembles them into different arrangements. The content of a single story appears in more than one chapter, and a single chapter sometimes includes the content of multiple stories. Between the story fragments, the characters are interspersed to form a whole. This structure can be referred to as fragmentary embellishment. It is the traditional Chinese novel structure, which has been adopted in such important novels as Unofficial History of the Scholars and Water Margin. However, Unofficial History of the Scholars and the Water Margin is unitary, wherein one individual tells the story. The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai employs an incomplete structure. As such, it breaks a complete story unit into many fragments. It then organizes these fragments into different narrative units, such as chapters, thus forming a structure of multilayered-coexistence and interlocking development. In terms of the general design, the story is still organized according to time and events, but, in terms of the individual parts, the novel breaks the order of time and events as it simultaneously changes and reverses them to some extent. In this sense, the structure of The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai not only maintains the essential characteristics of the embellished paragraph structure but also has its innovation and has gone beyond the traditional structure of the Chinese novel, which is more complicated and refined in comparison to the conventional unitary embellished paragraph. However, most notably, this level of complexity and refinement is based on the Chinese novel tradition, not the Western one.

As established, the main structure of The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai is still organized according to the sequence of time and events, and there are only some changes in the composition of the units. Secondly, The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai is not the typical or representative depiction of classical Chinese novels. It was published in 1892 when Western culture and literature had already spread to China. The author of the novel, Han Bangqing, failed in the imperial examination and, as a result：

> Spent many years in Shanghai, where he exchanged poems with Qian Xin-bo and He gui-sheng, the chief editor of Shenbao(申报), and other famous scholars in Shanghai. He also tried to be the editor of Shenbao, but he had a down-to-earth nature and did not tolerate restraint, such as trivial and redundant editing.[8]

At that time, Shanghai was the most open city in China, and, as a man of letters, Han Bangqing lived there for many years, most probably influenced by Western culture and literary trends. Thus, The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai should have taken on a bit of Western flavor, not totally a typical

---

〔8〕 胡适 HU Shi："〈海上花列传〉序" Haishanghua liezhuan xu ［"Preface to The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai,"］,韩邦庆 HAN Bangqing 著:《海上花列传》Haishanghua liezhuan ［The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai］,长沙 Changsha:岳麓书社 Yuelu shushe ［Yuelu Press］,2005 年,第 473 页.

recitation of the traditional Chinese novel. Western novels notably influence its elaborate and sophisticated structure. However, compared with Western novels such as the English detective novel Sherlock Holmes, which is from roughly the same period, the structure of The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai is still much more concise and refined. Additionally, from the perspective of story elements, the density of The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai is still relatively high. The book is less than 500,000 words in total, with more than 100 characters, and depicted events and scenes that are very complicated. Therefore, in general, the structure of The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai, its complexity and refinement, is still based on Chinese novels. Its structure follows the essential characteristics of classical Chinese novels: concise and straightforward.

According to Zheng Min, "whether in China or the West, the development of novel writing and the novel theory is relatively a complicated process, during which there are evolutions, leaps and bounds, also stagnation, repetition, and sometimes even self-denial. Therefore, it is not difficult to find examples of counter-evidence. "[9] With this context, the novel-focused tradition of any nation is complex, and a comparison of two different kinds of literature can only be made based on their typical representative works, which inevitably leaves a lot to be desired. However, such a macro comparison is, by definition, necessary. It is easy to see the trees without such macro comparisons, but not the forest, just like the blind man feeling an elephant. One will most likely get a specific image but lack a holistic grasp of the totality of the thing before them.

This article discusses the difference between Chinese and Western novels and attempts to address the issues of comparison regarding the high density and low fineness of story elements in Chinese novels and the low density and high fineness of the story elements in Western novels. To a certain extent, such differences affected the structure of Chinese and Western novels, forming the preference found in Chinese novels to organize story elements in the order of time and event development, with a relatively concise and straightforward structure. Comparatively, Western novels tend to make a difference in elements and structural methods, with a rather elaborate and refined structure. This conclusion is only a statement of fact, not a value judgment. Chinese novels, influenced by Chinese society and culture, tend to reflect the universe and macroscopic view of society and life in texts, so the story elements tend to be denser. Whereas, Western novels, influenced by Western society and culture, pay more attention to expressing concrete life, and their depicted story elements tend to be more detailed. The two approaches of story elements form two different characteristics of traditional Chinese and Western novels. Each of these characteristics has its own advantages. Both are in line with the national culture and social framework from which they emerged and appropriately reflected the life of their respective societies and the thoughts and feelings of their people, both of which are worthy of affirmation.

Naturally, a novel is the expression of the world and the reflection of human thoughts by sensual and concrete images. From the point of view of modernity, to express the specifics of people and events and to represent the sensual and specific life, the appropriate reduction of the density of story elements and increase in the fineness of the novel creates a dynamic balance linked to the direction of

〔9〕 郑敏 ZHENG Min:"中西小说观念比较" Zhongxi xiaoshuo guannian bijiao〔A Comparison of Chinese and Western Conceptions of the Novel〕,《外国文学研究》 Waiguo wenxue yanjiu〔Studies in Foreign Literature〕,1993 年第 3 期.

the development of the novel. Western novels developed along this line，and Chinese novels developed along the same line as well. The overall development from classical Chinese literary novels to Song and Yuan Huaben，to Ming and Qing novels，from Romance of the Three Kingdoms and Water Margin to The Plum in the Golden Vase and Dream of the Red Chamber the trend is also the same. It is only as the development of Chinese novels reached a stage of retardation，or even stagnation，after the introduction of the chapter novel.

In contrast，the Western novel developed enormously in the 17th and 18th centuries，especially in the 19th century，pulling away from the Chinese novel on the road to modernization. As a result，at the end of the 19th century，when the Western influence spread to the East，the Chinese novels absorbed many ideas，forms，and techniques from their Western counterparts and likewise embarked on the road to modernization under the Western novel's influence. It is conceivable that，without Western influence，the Chinese novels would also embark on the road of modernization at the earliest possible point in their self-development，but this is already a separate issue needing to be addressed in a subsequent article.

中文题目：
中西古典小说叙事中的密度与细度比较研究

赵炎秋

文学博士，博士生导师，湖南师范大学文学院教授，外国语学院兼职教授，研究方向为文艺理论与比较文学。通讯地址：湖南省长沙市岳麓区麓山路 36 号，湖南师范大学文学院，410081 长沙。手机：18673107013；电子邮箱：zhyq814@163.com。

孙　旭

西安外国语大学中文学院副教授，西安郭杜教育产业开发区文苑南路，中国，710128；Email：xu-sun@hotmail.com。

摘　要：密度指在一定的篇幅内，故事要素数量的多少。细度指故事要素展示的充分性和内在完满性。比较而言，中国古代小说故事要素的密度较高，细度较低；西方小说故事要素的密度较低，细度较高。这部分造成了中国小说结构简洁精练，西方小说结构繁复精致的特点。这些特点各有长处，符合中西小说所自产生的民族文化和社会土壤，也能恰切地反映各自所处社会的生活和人民的思想感情，都是值得肯定的。

关键词：中西小说；故事要素；密度；细度；结构