Jun Zeng*

Multi-source symbiosis of textual meaning

Abstract: In both Chinese and Western literary theory, there are several funda-mental perspectives on the exploration of "the source of textual meaning," which can be categorized into ontological, entitative, and generative types. Future research must integrate the "source" perspective with the "trigger" perspective, while overcoming the postmodern cultural pluralist limitations of "multiple sym-biosis." This article adopts the perspective of a "multi-source symbiosis" of textual meaning and maintains that textual meaning possesses characteristics of multiple sources, co-generation, and dynamic transformation. The "multi-source symbiosis" of textual meaning does not emphasize "differences," but rather strives for "consensus." The objectivity of the source of textual meaning and the regularity of textual understanding and interpretation are the prerequisites for agreement on textual meaning. The trigger mechanism for the symbiosis of textual meanings lies in three aspects: disclosing textual meanings in reading behavior, proliferating textual meanings in critical activities, and multi-source triggering of textual meanings in literary events. "Multi-source symbiosis" creates a heteroglossic state of textual meaning, with the ultimate goal of establishing a common understanding of textual meaning.

Keywords: co-generation; consensus; dynamic transformation; heteroglossia; trigger

1 Multiple sources of textual meaning

The genesis of textual meaning is not straightforward, but rather complex and diverse. The *Great Preface* posits that "the mutated *feng (pien-feng)* emerge from emotions (*ch'ing*), but they do not extend beyond rites and moral principles" (Owen 1996: 47). When applied to the exploration of textual meaning, this statement sug-gests that the generation of textual meaning originates from the creative subject, encompassing the subject's emotions, thoughts, desires, imagination, etc. However, the generation of textual meaning is not influenced by a single factor but undergoes interference and influence from multiple factors such as political ideology, social ethics, ideal reader expectations, and non-intellectual elements in the creative process. In academic history, exploring the source of text meaning also involves

*Corresponding author: Jun Zeng**, Shanghai University, Shanghai, China, E-mail: zjuncyu@163.com

analyzing the relevant core concepts and interpreting the existing theories' paradigms.

In terms of the core concepts, "the source of textual meaning" encompasses three key words, namely, text, meaning, source. Each of these concepts has a unique historical background and specific meanings in different theoretical fields.

We begin firstly by considering the concept of "text." The etymological root of the word is "*texere*," meaning 'to weave,' such as in the word "*tex*tile," or 'to make,' as in the word "archi*tect*" (Holland 1975: 813). This concept was introduced into literary theory by Roland Barthes. In his essay "From work to Text," Barthes (1986) defines "text" as a concept that differs from "work." Literary work is the materialized form of literature, appearing as a completed and tangible book waiting for readers to open it. The text, by contrast, is a product "woven" by the author using language symbols and is a meaningful space constructed in the mind of the reader through reading. As Barthes posits, "the work is a fragment of substance, it occupies a portion of the spaces of books (for example, in a library). The Text is a methodological field" (Barthes 1986: 57). Therefore, the concept of text emphasizes more the literary significance of a text than its material form. Text can transcend its material form of existence and even evade linguistic symbols due to its intellectual, non-material nature. Therefore, it can be employed extensively in all meaningful daily activities and cultural and social events. This also accounts for why scholars of cultural studies consider "text" to be "cultural text" and "social text." Nevertheless, regardless of the type of "text" they are engaged with, they all share a commonality in research methods: viewing text as a structural element and symbols. Regardless of their contextual differences, all the interpretations of "text" share a common ground in methodology, that is, of viewing "text" as a structural element and symbol.

Secondly, the discussion of "meaning" is a fundamental issue in the humanities. The central objective of the humanities, including literature, history, and philosophy, is to give meaning to human existence, human behavior, and their products, making the concept of "meaning" more intricate. "Literary theory and hermeneutics have had difficulty providing a satisfactory treatment of 'meaning'" (Sheriff 1981: xi). "Meaning" often has different connotations in various theories, and even exists in the form of diverse expressions. Such terms as "intentions," "thoughts," "ideas," etc., are primarily related to the subject of meaning production, while "significance" and "implication" generally refer to the meaning between the lines of the text. From a linguistic and semiotic perspective, there are numerous related terms, including "lexical meaning," "grammatical meaning," "literal meaning," "metaphorical meaning," "allegorical meaning," "symbolic meaning," "dictionary meaning," "connotation/intension," "extension," "implication," "denotation," "referent," "underlying meaning," etc. (Wu and Ji 2012: 77–81). Wang Zhenglong characterizes the evolution of meaning

production in contemporary Western literary theory as follows: author-centered (in pre-modern time); text-centered (in the first half of the twentieth century); and reader-centered (in the second half of the twentieth century and afterwards) (Wang 2002: 30). If taking Zhang Jiang's "theory-centered" suggestion into consideration, we might find that meaning production enters the fourth stage (Zhang 2016: 5–12). In essence, the "theory-centered" approach assumes a novel form of literary significance being "theory-oriented." That is to say, the literary meaning is not determined by the author, the text, or the reader but, rather, it is derived from "off-site requisition" ("场外征用"), mechanical application of social and cultural theories (Zhang 2014: 5). It is noteworthy that "significance" is not the sole or paramount value of literature; other dimensions such as "emotion" and "aesthetics" are equally essential. Consequently, when discussing the issue of "the source of textual significance," we should be aware of the various dimensions of "text."

Thirdly, there is the concept of "source." The term "source" can be interpreted as 'the origin/beginning of things' and 'the root cause that makes things happen.' In other words, it primarily refers to two meanings, namely, the location or place where events occur and the underlying reasons for events' occurrence. The former focuses on the inherent nature of meaning derived from a specific location or place, while the latter emphasizes the conditions that generate meaning, which can only arise under specific circumstances and situations.

Since "the source of textual meaning" has been made clear, the interpretative paradigm of relevant theories can be easily comprehended. In the context of "the source of textual meaning," there have been multiple interpretations of Chinese and foreign literary theory throughout history:

1) Originating from the author. This interpretation aims to discover the author's original intention through social and historical analysis.
2) Derived from the text. This interpretation emphasizes the text's research value, as seen in New Criticism and Structuralism. The "intentional fallacy" in New Criticism criticizes the assumption that the meaning of a text is determined by the author's intention in creating it ; Structuralism emphasizes "there is nothing outside the text" (Derrida 1997: 163).
3) Derived from readers. This interpretation emphasizes the role of readers in generating meaning through representation, as seen in poststructuralism, reception aesthetics, and reader response criticism. The well-known slogans such as "the death of the author" (Barthes 1977: 163) and "reading […] is always a misreading" (Bloom 1975: 3) are associated with this interpretation.
4) Derived from theory. Represented by the cultural theories in the second half of the twentieth century, this approach emphasizes the application of existing social and cultural theories. As a result, some Chinese scholars propose an idea of "literary theory without literature" to denote that the textual meaning comes

merely from the critics' reference to certain theoretical frameworks (Jin 2004: 89–91).

5) Derived from dialogue. Inspired by Habermas's theory of communicative action and Bakhtin's dialogism, this perspective holds that textual meaning originates from encounters, dialogues, and even confrontations between subjects.

The explanatory frameworks mentioned above can be divided into two categories: ontological theory and entity theory. Ontological theory maintains that the origin of textual meaning lies in a physical subject or object through which meaning is created, preserved, or transmitted. Entity theory also necessitates a criterion for evaluating the significance of a text. This criterion considers the meaning that aligns with its creation, preservation, and transmission as the "original significance" and the highest standard of significance. This is known as the "meaning priority" question. With this "meaning priority," other potential interpretations can be labeled as "misreadings" or "misinterpretations." Therefore, misreading theory is not solely a creation of Reception Aesthetics, but also an inevitable logical outcome of all "substantial theories" in interpreting textual significance. In addition to the ontological and entitative perspectives, there is also a generative perspective, which posits that significance does not stem from the author, text, reader, reality, or theory, but rather from the interrelationships among these subjects of significance, the author, text, reader, and text, reality, and theory, with "text" serving as the intermediary. "Relationship theory," "dialogue theory," "intertextuality/intersubjectivity," "literary activity theory" are often interrelated in these multiple dimensions.

Yet, in explicating "the source of textual meaning," all the ontological, entitative, and generative perspectives are faced with great challenges. These theories have varying viewpoints and theoretical foundations, and this inevitably leads to potential blind spots and insights. A single interpretation model cannot fully capture the diverse reality of text interpretation. Similarly, aggregating various textual meaning interpretation models to create a stable interpretation framework and system cannot accurately reflect the diversity of specific text interpretation behaviors. Dialogue and communication are key, with a focus on effective communication. Each encounter triggers unique mechanisms and shapes a unique field of understanding and interpretation. Therefore, our perceptions about theory construction must be changed: we have to abandon the paradigm of monism that relies on a single logical starting point to determine the "source of textual meaning"; at the same time, we must discard the paradigm of being systematic, which attempts to construct a universal fixed theoretical system.

2 From "multiple symbiosis" to "multi-source symbiosis"

Generating meaning from text is inextricably linked to both the text's source and its trigger, and hence they must be jointly considered. It is essential to solve the problem of the origin of textual meaning from the perspective of entity theory and the problem of the occurrence of textual meaning from the perspective of generation theory. To achieve this, the most effective strategy is to integrate both.

From the perspective of "entity theory," it is evident that the source of textual meaning is not singular. It may come from the author or the reader or is directly present in the text. Therefore, the source of textual meaning exhibits the characteristics of "multiple sources." According to "generation theory," textual meaning only exists in a potential state, regardless of where it originates. It is not until the emergence of the "triggering cause" that the potential text meaning becomes apparent, and new meanings are generated in the interaction with the trigger. This is why literary and artistic works can be repeatedly read with new interpretations. If we can examine the "multi-source" phenomenon of textual meaning from an entitative theory perspective, we will notice the "symbiosis" of textual meaning under the influence of multiple sources from the generative theory perspective.

Therefore, we propose the concept of "multi-source symbiosis" as a solution to the problem of textual meaning. Over the past four decades, due to China's Reform and Opening-up policies, numerous Chinese scholars have advanced the concept of "multiple symbiosis" as a result of the influence of Western postmodern cultural pluralism on the one hand and the emphasis on contemporary Chinese cultural diversity on the other. The widely accepted concept of "multiple symbiosis" is actually a combination of postmodernist cultural pluralism and ancient Chinese ideas of harmony between nature and humanity, symbiosis, and common prosperity. It has been widely utilized and has had a significant impact on academic research. The academic term "multiple symbiosis" was first used in fields such as biology, geology, and related engineering technology research to describe the diversity and coexistence of species and substances in a specific historical and geographical environment.

For instance, Kong Zhaoqing introduced the concept of a "multiple symbiosis model of the Dajishan tungsten deposit" (Kong 1982). In the 1980s, this concept began to be applied to cultural issues and emerged as a notion that stood in opposition to both "linear evolution" (Xiao and Hu 1989) and "mono-orthodoxy" (Li 1989). The term "pluralism" was first used in the early 1990s. However, with Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour Talks, China restarted economic reforms and clarified the direction of the socialist market economy. The concept of "multiple symbiosis" emerged as a

pivotal principle for China to engage with the global community and adapt to the advancements of globalization (Wang 1993). This principle holds significant relevance in the 21st century, where a "clash of civilizations" is increasingly becoming a salient feature of international relations (Huntington 1996). Huntington aptly captured this trend, noting that it is influenced by several factors, including terrorism, the resurgence of nationalism, and the propagation of financial crises. This has led to the emergence of antiglobalization sentiments that were once supported by the developed capitalist countries in Europe and the United States following World War II. The concept of cultural pluralism has come under critical scrutiny, with Stuart Hall, the intellectual figurehead of the Birmingham School, delivering numerous speeches on multiculturalism. His perspective is as follows:

> Over the years, the term 'multiculturalism' has come to reference a diffuse, indeed maddeningly spongy and imprecise discursive field, a terrain of false trails and misleading universalities. It references a wild variety of political strategies. Thus conservative multiculturalism assimilates difference into the customs of the majority. Liberal multiculturalism subordinates difference to the claims of a universal citizenship, pluralist multiculturalism, corals difference within a commonly segmented social order. Commercial multiculturalism exploits and consumes differences in the spectacle of the exotic and corporate multiculturalism manages differences in the interests of the center. Multiculturalism accordingly has a multitude of different enemies. (Hall 2000a)

It is evident that multiculturalism faces the risk of internal deconstruction due to the diversity of ideological positions. In another speech, Hall emphasized that "the multicultural question has a disruptive impact on our traditional notions about the categories of race and ethnicity." He also believed that "The awkwardness of multicultural questions has the logic of a double inscription" (Hall 2000b: 11). Both the theoretical advocacy and cultural practice of multiculturalism have overemphasized the particularity of the marginalized, disadvantaged, and repressed minorities, and logically this leads to an illegitimacy of the common and universal. For this reason, Jacques Rancière regretfully found that "either these human rights no longer meant anything, or they became the absolute rights of those without rights, that is to say rights demanding a response which was itself absolute, beyond all formal, juridical norms" (Rancière 2007: 33). This is an ethical dilemma inherent in the logic of multiculturalism. As a result, this may lead to the devaluation and rejection of "the One, the absolute."

Therefore, the concept of "multi-source symbiosis" not only embodies the inherent rationality of cultural pluralism in "multiple symbiosis," but also transcends and overcomes its theoretical limitations. Using the concept of "multi-source symbiosis" to explain the source of textual meaning not only establishes that "source" is unique or fixed, but also includes the following basic judgments: there

are multiple sources of textual meaning; there is co-generation of textual meaning; and there are dynamic changes in the meaning of text.

2.1 Multiple sources of textual meaning

In literary creation, the author, as the originator and arbiter of meaning, imbues the text with a meaning that necessarily reflects their intention. Consequently, the author's intention forms an integral part of the text's overall meaning. The work or the written text fixes its language on a material medium, and it is those language symbols, including images, videos, etc., that convey the text's intended meaning. As the reader receives the meaning of a literary text, they transform it from a latent state to a distinct comprehension, re-materializing it in their minds throughout the reading process. Meanwhile textual meaning is intricately linked to social reality. Although social reality does not constitute the core essence of textual meaning, the linguistic symbols that constitute the text embody "the elements of social reality" in the guise of "reference," which invests the text with meaning. Consequently, social reality serves as the bedrock for the "referential" (i.e., meaningful) nature of linguistic symbols. Therefore, the author, the reader, the text, and the social reality all constitute integral components of the overall meaning of the text.

However, there is a problem that has to be raised: why is a particular source of textual meaning emphasized in different theoretical schools? In other words, why do the New Critics refute "the intentional fallacy" and "the affective fallacy"? Why does Roland Barthes announce "the death of the author"? Why does Hans-Robert Jauss prefer to view literary history as a history of readers' reception? The emergence of these theoretical trends not only highlights a single source of textual meaning, but also underscores the significance of textual meaning. In other words, from a social and historical perspective, the author's intention holds "the priority of meaning" in comprehending literary works. Consequently, the exploration of the author's original intention has become a goal pursued by social and historical criticism. New Criticism suggests that the text itself is a source of meaning superior to the author's intention and the reader's feelings, as literary and artistic texts make their own meaning, and the author's intention, which usually results in subjective meaning, cannot be fully known, resulting in the text's subjective meaning. Therefore, what we need to do is to overcome the limitations of the "priority sources" of the textual meaning, fully comprehend the validity of those theoretical trends, and then try to establish a more comprehensive and objective view of "multiple sources."

2.2 Co-generation of textual meaning

The "four elements of literature" argument, as posited by Abrams in his seminal work *The mirror and the lamp: Romantic theory and the critical tradition*, offers further theoretical underpinning for the multifaceted nature of textual meaning. As he observes, "although any reasonably adequate theory takes some account of all four elements, almost all theories, as we shall see, exhibit a discernible orientation towards one only" (Abrams 1953: 6). This observation highlights the inherent one-sidedness and even bias of the Western literary criticism. From this perspective, Chinese scholars view the "four elements of literature" as a dynamic process of mutual influence and mutual stimulation, thereby contributing Chinese wisdom to the discussion of the source of textual meaning. Tong Qingbing developed the "four elements of literature" theory into a "literary activity theory" based on the "double aesthetic relationship structure" (Tong 2001: 58). The symbiosis of textual meanings is reflected in the symbiosis of meanings in literary activities and runs through the various relationships between literary elements and their activities.

The writer's intended meaning can only be deciphered through the process of encoding. In this context, "encoding" refers to the act of writers employing linguistic symbols to impart textual meaning. If a work is not read by a reader, it remains mere written words. Consequently, the transition from "work" to "text" necessitates the involvement and intervention of the reader. The connotation of "text" should be predicated on the "meaning-transmitting" activities of the "open text." Similarly, a reader's semantic comprehension, emotional resonance, and artistic interpretation remain potential without the "interpretation" link. Consequently, when examining the attributes of textual meaning, attention should be paid to three facets: literary activity, meaning production, and communication and dialogue. In this process, the "creative activity" ceases upon the finalization of the text, encompassing the "literary revision" activity. The "receptive activity" encompasses not only the reader's engagement with the text but also their comprehension of the author. It is circumscribed by the reader's reading situation, the author's anticipations, experiential schema, emotional structure, and ideology. Consequently, "reception activities" (i.e., "reading activities" and "viewing activities") are not only integral to the "multi-source symbiosis" of textual meaning but also constitute the critical "switch" and "catalyst" that propel the emergence of textual meaning. Reading activities activate numerous factors that impact the emergence of textual meaning and collaboratively shape the connotation of the text.

2.3 Dynamic changes in the meaning of text

After incorporating "literary activities" into the analysis of textual meaning, it is necessary to acknowledge that the "multi-source symbiosis" of textual meaning is actually a dynamic process of change, which is constrained by various variables, such as time, space, situation (context). Over time, literary works evolve and posit themselves along the literary history. During various literary periods, the interpretation and evaluation of literary works can vary. And regardless of the positive or negative values about them, the attention these works receive throughout literary history also changes over time. For instance, when entering the words "Mo Yan" into *CNKI*, a leading academic database service platform in China, we get the fluctuations since the 1980s in scholarly interest on him. And obviously, the interest peak occurred in the year he won the Nobel Prize in Literature (see Figure 1).

In terms of the spatial distribution, the academic papers on Mo Yan are most extensively published by Shandong University and Beijing Normal University. This phenomenon can be attributed to two reasons: firstly, Mo Yan is from Shandong, and Shandong University, the most renowned institution of higher learning in Shandong, has a geographical advantage in its research; secondly, Mo Yan graduated from Beijing Normal University, and also served as the director of the school's International Writing Center, which makes it even more possible for the scholars at this university to write about him. Therefore, it is reasonable that these two universities have produced the most outstanding research results on Mo Yan (see Figure 2).

Moreover, the changes in the situation (context) also lead to variations in the interpretation of textual meanings, which is quite common in both literary criticism and literary history. As such, we will not delve into it in detail. Apart from the illustration above, the studies on literary historical shift and cross-cultural comparison are also typical examples for the dynamic transformation of
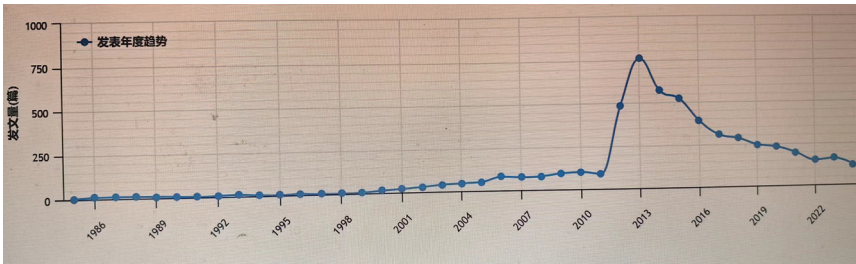

Figure 1: The numbers of the academic papers on Mo Yan published on *CNKI* since the 1980s.
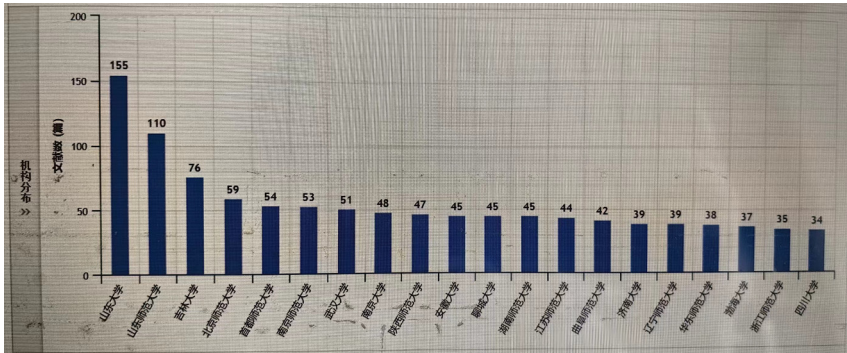
Figure 2: Academic institutions with their numbers of publications on Mo Yan on *CNKI*.

textual meaning as it varies over time, space, and circumstances (context). These are fundamental ideas in literary theory, yet it is usually easy for us to overlook them.

3 The prerequisites for reaching a consensus on the meaning of text

In postmodern cultural pluralism, "diversity" means, to a certain extent, acknowledging the inherent absoluteness of "differences" and consequently disavowing the possible "consensus." Ultimately, the differences can only be partially eliminated through consultation and negotiation. Nevertheless, this perspective runs counter to the objectives of literature and art in seeking common understanding, values, and aesthetic experiences. Thus, it is necessary to reiterate "a consensus on textual meaning" by "multiple sources."

3.1 The objectivity of the source of textual meaning

"Objectivity" refers to an attribute that is not subject to individual will and remains constant, regardless of time, space, situation, and other factors. When discussing literary meaning and production, we must adhere to the fundamental principle of "objectivity of the source of textual meaning."

Firstly, the author's creative intention exists objectively. Consequently, the relationship between the author's intention and literary significance is that the author's intention is consistently reflected in literary texts in an implicit or explicit

manner. This is consistently observed in creative talks, diaries, and manuscripts. The modification traces and other methods of "literary historical data" processing remain unrevealed by readers and critics. Therefore, even though the author may be deceased (Barthes 1977: 163), the author's intention persists.

Secondly, in terms of its form, the literary text also possesses objectivity. This objectivity is intricately linked to the materiality of the work. The very concept of "work" is predicated upon the historical epoch of written literature, particularly printed literature. In today's oral literature, such as that found in folk literature, one can observe the objectivity of texts in "version variation." Each version lacks an original concept. Instead, they can all be considered as "copies" and "different performances," reproduced by someone other than the author. However, in the era of written literature, the text became "rare copies" ("善本") and at the same time, concepts such as "fake copies" ("伪本") and "fragmented copies" ("残本") emerged. In the age of technological reproducibility, printing technology innovation did not completely abandon manual reproduction logic. Consequently, Walter Benjamin viewed printing as a unique instance of technological reproducibility. In Benjamin's view, "The enormous changes brought about in literature by movable type, the technological reproduction of writing, are well known. But they are only a special case, though an important one, of the phenomenon considered here from the perspective of world history" (Benjamin 2008: 20). It was only with the advent of digital reproducibility that the form of literary texts changed. "Hypertext" challenges the materiality of printed "works," emphasizing instead the materiality of "text" (whether it be "printed text" in the era of printing or "bits" in the era of digital reproducibility). Consequently, textual materiality determines the objectivity of textual meaning, which in turn impacts the possibility of consensus on textual meaning.

Thirdly, regarding the objectivity of social reality, which is a crucial aspect of meaning, its nature cannot be ignored. When exploring the connection between literature and social reality, there have been various theories throughout history, including the "ideas" theory, the "mirror" theory, and the "reflection" theory. While literature may not provide an accurate depiction of reality, reality itself is undoubtedly objective. However, we must also consider the perspective of structuralism regarding social reality. Structuralists believe that all social reality is, in fact, a construction of language, which is our conceptual understanding and grasp of social reality. As a result, due to differences in individual cognition, the social context of meaning seems to lose its objectivity. Nevertheless, this is a strategy employed by structuralism theory to replace "realism" with "epistemology." The material objectivity of social reality serves as the foundation and prerequisite for our understanding, while the linguistic construction of structuralism is merely a means of understanding and grasping social reality.

Finally, it must be recognized that readers of different groups and types also possess objectivity. A well-known Chinese proverb aptly summarizes this perspective: "The benevolent see benevolence, and the wise see wisdom" ("仁者见仁, 智者见智"). As the primary interpreter of literary texts, does the reader remain objective? This question echoes earlier structuralist logic. Our perspective rejects the existence of an abstract "ideal reader," instead emphasizing the importance of a specific group of readers. The saying "finding the right audience is difficult" ("知音难觅") suggests that the ideal reader is a theoretical construct, a value, and a goal. Therefore, while achieving an ideal interpretation and understanding of textual meaning as an ideal reader may be challenging, the objectivity of its meaning remains unchanged through each individual reader's reading experience and historical context.

3.2 Understanding and interpreting text effectively

In terms of the "symbiosis" of textual meaning, text comprehension and meaning interpretation also have their own norms, which is also a crucial prerequisite for achieving consensus on textual meaning.

Firstly, the language symbols possess two characteristics: arbitrariness and convention. As a tool for comprehension and interpretation of texts and meanings, the formation process of language symbols and signifiers is arbitrary. However, once a language symbol is established, conventionality becomes its defining feature. Therefore, conventions play a crucial role in the interpretation and comprehension of literary texts. Nevertheless, conventionality does not suggest that the meanings of literary texts are unchanging and inflexible. Just as music relies on finite notes to create beautiful movements, literature and literary criticism, along with other disciplines, create new meanings of human culture by following and breaking the rules of language symbols.

Secondly, the methods of literary criticism possess distinct "moves" or "routines." As Jean-François Lyotard explains in *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*, "the observable social bond is composed of language 'moves.' An elucidation of this assertion will lead us to the core of the matter at hand" (Lyotard 1983: 11). That is to say, literary criticism also employs techniques and modes, for instance, the "tension" and "ambiguity" in New Criticism, the "function" and "semantic square" in Structuralism, and the "différance" and "le supplément" in Deconstruction. The model of cultural theory is more significant and can be simplified into a series of antagonistic analytical strategies based on binary oppositions: such as bourgeoisie and proletariat in terms of class, men and women with regard to gender, white and black in the matter of race, First World and Third World as to geography, etc. These oppositions assume that the former is in a central and

oppressive position, while the latter is in a marginalized and oppressed position. Therefore, it is natural to confront the center and the strong with the marginalized and the weakened.

These "moves" or "routines" arise from the need for literary education in Western higher education to acquire a scientific nature and to establish a set of methods that are "replicable, generalizable, and trainable." As Eagleton states, "New Criticism evolved in the years when literary criticism in North America was trying to become 'professionalized' and accepted as a respectable academic discipline. The battery of critical instruments was a way of competing with hard sciences on their own terms in a society where such science was the dominant criterion of knowledge" (Eagleton 1983: 43). Secondly, it is essential to consider the potential impact of historical and cultural context. Culture serves as a boundary for interpreting textual meaning. Interpretation of textual meaning is limited by the boundaries of its historical and cultural context. However, in the context of globalization, cultural exchanges and collisions are becoming increasingly intense, and cultural integration is accelerating. Cultural borders are becoming loose and are gradually collapsing. For instance, the Bulgarian-French scholar Todorov had experienced anxiety of cultural identity for a long period when studying in France. However, with his adaptation to the new circumstances and acquisition of French citizenship, his cultural identity underwent a significant change: from "a stranger in Paris" and "cross-border" to a scholar with "dual cultural identity." This change is vividly revealed in his work *L'Homme dépaysé*. Dual cultural identity signifies that Todorov broadened the boundaries of his historical and cultural context.

Finally, the consensus on textual meaning possesses certain characteristics of the times. While the conventionality of textual meaning exists, it is not static. As times change, the meanings of texts evolve. Consequently, we should examine the conventionality of textual meaning from a dynamic, transformative, and evolving perspective, integrating its era-specific characteristics into our understanding of the conventionality of textual meaning. For instance, "Every era has its own unique literature" (Wang 2017: 1). Correspondingly, each era has a distinct consensus on the meaning of a given literary text. In a particular era, there is a prevalent consensus on textual meaning. At the same time, a consensus that was once achieved may no longer be widely recognized in a certain historical period, but this does not signify the absolute demise of the consensus. As Bakhtin posits, "Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival" (Bakhtin 1986: 170). Perhaps in the distant future, we will still hear the echoes from history.

4 The mechanism for the "symbiosis" of textual meaning

"The source of textual meaning" cannot simply be identified as an objective and static process, but, more importantly, as a subjective and dynamic one. Different from the "originating location" perspective, the "triggering cause" perspective must also be taken into consideration, which implies how the textual meaning is generated. What matters here is to be aware of two points: firstly, the process of textual meaning production is closely related to the subjects, because meaning is always a product of human spiritual acclivities; secondly, meaning is created when the text encounters the subjects, and this encounter achieves symbiosis in the triggering of multiple sources of textual meaning.

4.1 Reading behavior: the opening of the textual meaning

Firstly, the generation of literary meaning is intricately linked to the activities of two literary subjects: the author and the reader. From a semiotic perspective, literary activities can be viewed as a process that goes from "encoding" by the author to "decoding" by the reader, or from "meaning stitching" by the author to "meaning opening" by the reader. The author and the reader play distinct roles in the encoding and decoding of meaning, respectively, which together constitute all aspects of "textual meaning generation."

Secondly, the process of generating reading behavior can be summarized as moving from "meaning (through reading)" to "gestalt reconstruction (through understanding)." In the fields of reader-response theory, reception aesthetics, and hermeneutics, reading behavior has been phenomenologically reduced and empirically developed. The term "meaning (through reading)" signifies that during the process of reading (or watching), the text gradually "reveals" itself to the reader's gaze and is comprehended by the reader. "Gestalt reconstruction (through understanding)" denotes the process of the reader combining their own expectations, preconceptions, and self-filling of "blanks" and then interpreting the text after receiving the information conveyed by the text.

Finally, reading behavior is not an abstract expression, but rather a behavior executed by readers who possess unique personalities and social attributes within a specific historical period and social context. Therefore, it is imperative to incorporate the perspective of reading sociology in order to make a research paradigm shift from "abstract individual readers" to "specific reader groups." Phenomenological and

hermeneutic reading research necessitates the consideration of abstract individual readers; in literary readings, the generation of textual meaning is, of course, intricately linked to the text itself. Nevertheless, the text serves as a "triggering cause," and true meaning originates from the personal experiences of specific readers.

4.2 Critical activity: proliferation of meaning in texts

In determining textual meaning, the experts' critical activities are the most significant factor. In my book, *Cultural analysis of seeing* (Zeng 2007), I divide viewing subjects into "ordinary viewers/readers" (the moderate and silent majority), "fans," and "experts." The first category, "ordinary viewers" or "spectators," is referred to as "the mass" in cultural imagery. In many people's minds, ordinary viewers are vulgar and lacking in artistic cultivation, and their tastes are unrefined. Since most ordinary viewers are not financially wealthy, they have no higher spiritual aspirations, and sensual pleasure then becomes their top priority. Secondly, a "fan" is characterized as an excessive and obsessive observer, who reads and watches repeatedly. In social psychology, this refers to identification, exclusive possession, and domination (including material possession of the object of worship and symbolic possession of the object of worship). From a cultural perspective, popular art refers to "making do." Some fans even engage in the object of obsession to a creative level, such as discussing and adapting the script, pushing the plot to develop in the direction they expect. However, the meanings multiplied by the first two types of viewers/readers often become fragmented, unsystematic, and unconscious. Enter the third category of "readers/viewers," who are truly committed to expanding meaning – the "experts." To a certain extent, they are also fans but of a different kind, being calmly obsessive. They usually advocate the middle-class taste of "beauty at a distance." Their primary responsibility is to reproduce meaning, and they are committed to interpreting and reinterpreting textual meaning through intertextual reading/viewing (Zeng 2007: 251–316).

4.3 Literary events: multi-source triggers for textual meaning

In recent years, the concept of "event" has garnered significant attention, particularly in the theoretical works of Deleuze, Badiou, and Eagleton. It is crucial to note that the term "event" extends beyond its common usage in everyday language to denote occurrences or happenings. In the context of literature, "literary events" are significant occurrences that have far-reaching impacts. However, these events with

singularity should be regarded as something significant, sudden, and far-reaching. From a literary and artistic perspective, regular readings by readers do not hold the same weight as momentous events like Mo Yan winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. This achievement sparked widespread attention and a proliferation of literary meanings attached to Mo Yan and his works. In the same vein, the adaptation of Chen Zhongshi's *White Deer Plain* (《白鹿原》) from the novel to the television program transformed a literary classic that had been forgotten by regular readers into a "literary event." Other examples include the discovery of Zhang Ailing's posthumous manuscripts and the publication of the translation of *Journey to the West*. These literary events evoke distinct meanings in literary texts in various ways. Each event can activate different sources of textual meaning, leading to a renewed explosion of meaning. As art communication, cultural consumption, and creative industries continue to evolve, especially in the commercial and market-oriented field of "event marketing," these man-made factors increasingly shape the meaning of texts. They are currently among the most significant sources of textual meaning.

5 Conclusion: the meaning of the text changes from "heteroglossia" to "common understanding"

The "multi-source symbiosis of textual meaning" involves two fundamental aspects: the multi-source nature of textual meaning and the symbiotic nature of textual meaning. When discussing literary meaning, Western literary theory presents two fundamentally different approaches. One is based on the belief that the author's original intention serves as the supreme standard for the stable meaning of the text, and the author is the source of meaning. So restoring and capturing the author's original intention is considered the highest judgement standard and ultimate goal. The other is based on the belief that meaning for different individuals and contexts is uncertain, because the text is open to multiple interpretations. From the perspective of "multi-source symbiosis" of textual meaning, textual meaning possesses both the potential for consensus and instability; there exist both practical representations "inside literature" and operational mechanisms "outside literature." Therefore, the interdependence of multiple sources of textual meaning inevitably leads to a "heteroglossia" state of textual meaning.

Firstly, the "multi-source symbiosis" characteristic of textual meaning denotes that it is not sourced from a single origin or confined to a fixed format. Consequently,

textual meaning exhibits diversity, proliferation, and fluidity, leading to the phenomenon of "fugue" in textual meaning. Throughout the history of literature, it is common for "correct readings" and "misreadings," "single meanings" and "complex meanings" to coexist. Secondly, the levels of meaning within the text are not all equally significant. There exists a struggle for "meaning priority" within the literary sphere, and it predicts various relationships of textual meaning, such as "dominant-hegemonic," "negotiative," and "confrontational" (Hall 1980 [1973]: 128–138). Finally, the status of textual meaning as heteroglossia does not indicate complete opposition and contradiction, but rather a display of the inherent diversity of textual meaning. Although it may not be feasible to seek unique, fixed, and common textual meaning, we are still committed to providing a better understanding of the richness of textual meaning by shifting the standpoint from "heteroglossia" to "common understanding." Building toward a shareable community of textual meaning is both urgent and achievable, and it is also one of the central objectives for literary researchers in revealing textual meanings.

References

Abrams, Meyer Howard. 1953. *The mirror and the lamp: Romantic theory and the critical tradition*. London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich. 1986. Toward a methodology for the human sciences. In Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (eds.), translated by Vern W. McGee, *Speech genres and other late essays*, 159–172. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Barthes, Roland. 1977. The death of the author. In *Image, music, text*, 142–148. Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana.

Barthes, Roland. 1986. From work to text. In *The rustle of language*, 56–64. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang/Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Benjamin, Walter. 2008. The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility: Second version. In Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty & Thomas Y. Levin (eds.), translated by Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, et al., *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, and other writings on media*, 19–55. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Bloom, Harold. 1975. *A map of misreading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1997. *Of grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Eagleton, Terry. 1983. *Literary theory: An introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Hall, Stuart. 1980 [1973]. Encoding/decoding. *Culture, media, language*. In Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (ed.), *Working papers in cultural studies, 1972–1979*, 128–138. London: Routledge.

Hall, Stuart. 2000a. The multicultural question. Pavis lecture, 19 October. *Open University Digital Archive*. https://www.open.ac.uk/library/digital-archive/program/video:INHO10114 (accessed 12 April 2024).

Hall, Stuart. 2000b. The multicultural question: The Political Economy Research Centre Annual Lecture, delivered on 4th May 2000, Firth Hall Sheffield. *red.PUCP*, Pontificia universidad católica del Perú. https://red.pucp.edu.pe/wp-content/uploads/biblioteca/Stuart_Hall_The_multicultural_question. pdf (accessed 12 Apri 2024).

Holland, Norman. 1975. Unity identity text self. *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 90(5). 813–822.

Huntington, Samuel P. 1996. *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Jin, Huimin. 2004. 没有文学的文学理论 [Literary theory without literature: A prospect of 'empire-ization' of metalinguistics or theory]. *The Theory and Criticism of Literature and Art* 2004(3). 89–91.

Kong, Zhaoqing. 1982. 大吉山钨矿床成矿规律研究 (Research on the metallogenic laws of Dajishan tungsten deposit). *Geology and Exploration* 1982(6). 27–32.

Li, Jianping. 1989. 新潮·中国文坛奇异景观 [New wave: The strange landscape of Chinese literary circles]. Nanning: Guangxi People's Publishing House.

Lyotard, Jean-François. 1983. *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Owen, Stephen. 1996. *Readings in Chinese literary thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center.

Rancière, Jacques. 2007. The ethical turn in aesthetics and politics. Translated by Jean-Philippe Deranty. In Jean-Philippe Deranty, Danielle Petherbrige, John Rundell & Robert Sinnerbrink (eds.), *Recognition, work, politics: New directions in French critical theory* (Social and Critical Theory 5), 27–45. Leiden & Boston: Brill.

Sheriff, John K. 1981. *The fate of meaning: Charles Peirce, structuralism, and literature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Tong, Qingbing. 2001. 文学活动的审美维度 [The aesthetic dimension of literary activities]. Beijing: Higher Education Press.

Wang, Ning. 1993. 多元共生的时代·二十世纪西方文学比较研究 [The era of multiple symbiosis: A comparative study of Western literature in the twentieth century]. Beijing: Peking University Press.

Wang, Zhenglong. 2002. 文学意义研究 [Research on literary meaning]. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press.

Wang, Guowei. 2017. 宋元戏曲史 [The history of Song and Yuan Drama]. Jinan: Shandong Pictorial Publishing House.

Wu, Qi & Guangmao Ji. 2012. 从指示到征兆: 文学文本意义的结构及其解读 [From instructions to symptoms: The structure and interpretation of literary texts]. *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 2012(2). 77–81.

Xiao, Yang & Zhiming Hu. 1989. 文化学导论 [Introduction to culture]. Shijiangzhuang: Hebei Education Press.

Zeng, Jun. 2007. 观看的文化分析 [Cultural analysis of seeing]. Jinan: Shandong Education Press.

Zhang, Jiang. 2014. 强制阐释论 [Coercive interpretation]. *Literary Review* 2014(6). 5–18.

Zhang, Jiang. 2016. 理论中心论: 从没有文学的 "文学理论" 说起 [Theoretical center theory – Starting from "literary theory" without literature]. *Literary Review* 2016(5). 5–12.

Bionote

Jun Zeng
Shanghai University, Shanghai, China
zjuncyu@163.com

Jun Zeng (b. 1972) is a professor and doctoral supervisor at the School of Liberal Arts, Shanghai University, and a Young Scholar of the Yangtze River Scholars Program of the Ministry of Education of China. His research interests include literary studies, cultural theory, and criticism. His publications include *Thus speaks the West on China* (2020), Study of Bakhtin's Influence on Contemporary Western literary theories (2021), "The development stages of metaverse and its cultural consequences" (2023).