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The narrative function of temporal signs: toward a semio-narratology approach

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Abstract: Both narrative semiotics and semio-narratology are concerned with the relationship between “history” and “structure,” and consequently the academic focus in these areas has shifted to time. Do “temporal signs” exist? How is time semiotized by signs in narration? How do the narrative functions of temporal signs work? This paper answers these questions and explores semio-narratology, in a break with the ahistorical discourses of narrative semiotics, by way of a detailed analysis of *The True Story of Ah Q* and other works of modern fiction.

Keywords: history; narrative semiotics; *The True Story of Ah Q*; time

1 Foreword

In contrast to Greimas’ narrative semiotics approach to studying narrative texts, Yiheng Zhao proposed introducing narratology into semiotics. This represents a brand-new academic field, which he calls semio-narratology, or general narratology (Zhao 2013: 4). In *A general narratology*, Zhao did not get overly entangled in the similarities and differences between the two names, instead regarding narrative semiotics as one of the resource-based theories of semio-narratology. His approach requires the analysis of “non-narrativity” signs, a practice that can be classified into two parts: (a) identifying the distinctions between “narrativity” and “non-narrativity” factors in narrative texts and (b) expanding the scope of analysis beyond narrative texts to include pure semiotic texts (texts with non-narrativity) as well.¹ The former makes a case for noting that traditional narrative semiotics

¹ The term “(pure) semiotic text” was coined by Jun Zeng, intending to imply the existence of “non-narrativity texts.” According to Lyotard’s ideas on the postmodern, however, even scientific knowledge is narrative, and “non-narrativity texts” no longer exist. See Lyotard 1984.

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ignored “non-narrativity” factors to focus instead on the development of narrativity factors in the past. Semio-narratology, in contrast, is now beginning to analyze these “non-narrativity” factors. Regarding the latter, while Zhao (2011) stated in *Semiotic principles & problems* that narratology is subordinate to semiotics, semio-narratology is now trying to subsume semiotics with narratology by way of an ambitious academic project.²

Nevertheless, semio-narratology cannot completely escape the constraints of traditional theories, especially given that narratology and semiotics both contain a significant logical premise. As Paul Ricœur remarked, what motivates semiotic inquiry, in the face of this instability of what endures, is essentially the ambition to ground this perennality of the narrative function on rules not dependent upon history. From the perspective of semiotic inquiry, the preceding inquiry must appear tainted by a thoroughgoing historicism. If, through its style of traditionality, the narrative function may claim some perennality, this has to be based upon some achronological constraints. In short, it is necessary to pass from history to structure (Ricœur 1985: 46). Therefore, all efforts of classical narratology (also known as narrative semiotics according to Paul Ricœur) have been dedicated to “dechronologizing” and “relogicizing” narrative, which to some extent has become a nightmare for the emerging field of semio-narratology. The core issue here is how to deal with “time.” Paul Ricœur believes that “the narrative is related to time and behavior, and the possible condition of the narrative is the time structure of human behavior” (Ricœur 1999: 29). So, what is the meaning of “time” with regard to “signs”? A search through various semiotics dictionaries surprisingly reveals that the references to “time” have all but disappeared from contemporary semiotics discourse.³

Therefore, the first question is whether “time” has semiocity. Essentially, do “temporal signs” exist? If they do, the next logical question is: How is time semiotized by signs in narration? Do “temporal signs” have narrative functions? And what is the starting point from which to address these issues? According to the “narrative functions of temporal signs,” we propose to explore them from a semio-narratology perspective, in a break with the ahistorical discourses of narrative semiotics.

² In *Semiotic principles & problems*, Zhao divides the “semiotic text” into two types: narrative and statement, the former referring to texts with narrativity and the latter referring to texts with non-narrativity. See Zhao 2011: 321.

³ See: Danesi 2000; Greimas and Joseph 1999; Martin and Ringham 2000.

2 Question: When did Ah Q start to “come to a dead end”?

Our discussion of “temporal signs” will begin with Lu Hsun’s novel *The True Story of Ah Q*, a classical masterpiece of modern Chinese literature. In his memoir *Causes of The True Story of Ah Q*, Lu Hsun recalled that the novel was serialized as a supplementary column in the Morning Post, edited by Sun Fuyuan. Its humorous narrative tone was initially established because it was intended to be placed in the *Entertainment* columns of the paper. Starting with Chapter II, however, the editor decided to move the novel to the *New Literature and Art* column because it was gradually assuming a more serious style. The special attributes of these two columns gave the novel its distinctive duality of style: the humor of the delivery and the seriousness of the content. More importantly, Lu Hsun also explained a major vital detail in his memoir:

It took me about two months to write *The True Story of Ah Q*, and I certainly intended to end this story. But it seemed that Fuyuan did not approve of this, I cannot recall it clearly now. Or I suspect that if it concluded, he would come to protest. Therefore, I kept the “happy ending” inside my mind, but Ah Q had gradually come to a dead end. When the last chapter was waiting for publication, Fuyuan would not have allowed it if he had still been working for the Morning Post and would definitely have asked to let Ah Q survive for a few weeks. However, Fuyuan happened to be away for a period of time, and He Zuolin, who had no special feelings for Ah Q, temporarily took over Fuyuan’s duties. In this situation, the ‘happy ending’ was sent to Mr. He and was published. So, Ah Q had been shot for more than a month when Fuyuan returned to Peking. (Lu Hsun 2005: 398; translated by Mengqiu Wang.)

As the newspaper was printing one chapter each week, two months after the first chapter would have brought them to Chapter VII or VIII by the time to which Lu Hsun is referring. Still, by this time, the “happy ending” that would be revealed in the last chapter, Chapter IX, had already become the germ of an idea in Lu Hsun’s mind. The question is, when did Lu Hsun conceive the “happy ending” in his mind? How did this idea transform into the author’s narrative? And how do we analyze the details of the process by which “Ah Q starts to gradually come to a dead end” when adopting the close reading method?

The True Story of Ah Q consists of nine chapters. In the first five chapters, using a biographical style described as “energetic type” and “analytic type,” Lu Hsun holds forth about the themes of Ah Q’s life story, character, love, livelihood, and various other aspects. The “energetic type” biography was defined in Bakhtin’s ancient biography analyses several decades ago. As Bakhtin explains it, “this ‘energy’ manifests itself as the unfolding of his character in deeds and statements [...] the character’s being outside its ‘energy’ simply does not exist.” In the

“energetic type” biography, temporality is of particular importance. “It is a time that discloses character, but is not at all the time of a man’s becoming or growth.” To explain this more clearly, although the manifestations of temporal signs are inseparable in the “energetic type” biography, they are not mainly used to propel the life and growth of the hero. According to the presentation of the hero’s character, the events in their biography may cause “the biographical sequence to be broken up.” As Bakhtin has said, “features of character are themselves excluded from chronology” (Bakhtin 1981: 140–141).⁴

If the “energetic type” biography tends to manifest the hero’s character, the “analytic type” biography lays more emphasis on various life happenings and events, such as “social life, family life, conduct in war, relationships with friends, memorable sayings, virtues, vices, physical appearance, habits and so forth.” Thus, the “analytic type” biographical sequence is broken up as well, for “one and the same rubric subsumes moments selected from widely separate periods of a life. Here as well, what governs from the outset is the whole of the character” (Bakhtin 1981: 142).

Although this narrative has its specific background, it does not depict the characteristics of linear time of history and life. Accordingly, it can be seen that the earlier chapters of *The True Story of Ah Q* are written from an “energetic type” and “analytic type” biographical perspective such features as “rectification of name,” “character,” “love,” and “livelihood.” The stories presented in these chapters are mostly fragmentary, and the temporal correlation among the hero’s various life segments is not strong. In the novel, Ah Q’s livelihood serves as the wellspring from which the causes and effects of his life segments begin to be consciously constructed. Ah Q is punished for making a pass at Amah Wu, which eventually compels him to depart from Weichuang to start life afresh. In Chapter VI, he later returns to Weichuang after achieving success; his return is another major event. Not much is left to the imagination to discern that the events in Chapters IV through VI constitute a plot line with causal logic. The first half of *The True Story of Ah Q* is not completely consistent: the first three chapters reveal many moments of Ah Q’s life that are not linked either by temporality or by causality, and the second set of three chapters does not show temporality either. Still, there exists a certain causal connection between these events, forming a narrative feature that characterizes loose or weak plots as opposed to compact plots.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, the first six chapters of the novel remain relatively consistent overall. It is worth exploring the “temporal signs” in the novel. “Temporal signs” are language signs that clearly signal the time. For example,

⁴ In the author’s note, Bakhtin explains that “time is phenomenal; the essence of character is outside time. It is therefore not time that gives a character its substantiality.”

November 2018 is a temporal sign with reference to the Christian Era; National Day, and Mid-Autumn Festival are temporal signs with political and cultural connotations. In *The True Story of Ah Q*, the “Foreword” (Chapter I) focuses on the old saying “If the name is not correct, the words will not ring true,” drawing our attention to the type of biography, the name of Ah Q, and so on. There is only one indication of the time in the whole chapter: the narrator, who relates the tale in the first person, asks a hometown acquaintance to delve into the legal documents related to Ah Q; “eight months later, I received a letter in reply” (Lu 1946: 7). However, this indication of time has nothing to do with Ah Q’s life. In the following chapters, indications of historical linear time and specific individual lifetimes still do not appear.

In “A Brief Account of Ah Q’s Victories” (Chapter II), Ah Q says, “my ancestors [...] were greater than yours by a long shot!” (Lu 1946: 9). Here is an implicit meaning to refer to the temporal sign of the past. In “An Additional Account of Ah Q’s Victories” (Chapter III), Lu Hsun states, “thereafter, Ah Q felt serenely happy for many years” (Lu 1946: 20), which shows an implicit meaning to refer to a temporal sign of the future. This is immediately followed by the statement that an event occurs “on a spring day,” which is likewise neither clear nor specific, although it shows the implicit meaning to refer to a temporal sign of the present (the moment at which the story takes place). But it is Chapter IV that finally offers a vague statement about Ah Q’s age: “How was it to be anticipated that at the late age of 30, he should be brought so low by a little nun as to feel that he was fluttering, fluttering, fluttering” (Lu 1946: 30). That is to say, Ah Q is revealed to be in his late 20s and nearly in his 30s during his pathetic courtship. However, the temporal sign of “the late age of 30” does not advance the plot and thus cannot affect the behavior of the hero in time.

This fragmentary narrative style is characterized by temporal signs of implicit meanings; in other words, the style conveys a weak story without chronological order and a weak plot without causal links between the stories. By the time the readers reach “From his Rise to Fall” (Chapter VI), some subtle changes have emerged because several noteworthy temporal signs appear in this chapter. For instance, “The next time Weichuang saw Ah Q, it was just past the Mid-Autumn of the year” (Lu 1946: 47). “Mid-Autumn” is a temporal mark referring to traditional Chinese culture, just as the reference to a “spring day” was a temporal sign referring to the four seasons. “The heavens had just begun to darken” (Lu 1946: 47) is another temporal sign referring to the diurnal cycle, which shows that the narrative of Ah Q’s life has begun to become more specific and precise. Thus in narrating the story of Ah Q’s “rise,” the author has not adopted a fragmentary narrative style but continuously uses temporal signs such as “on the following day.” This shows the progress between the episodes and also corresponds to the reference to the passage of time in the title of Chapter VI (“From...to...”),

indicating the plot characteristics of temporality and causality. Therefore, it could be concluded that the plot of *The True Story of Ah Q* has been strengthened by the time it gets to Chapter VI. The sign of this strengthening is represented by the sign “on the following day,” which plays a significant role in the narrative from this point onward.

However, the temporality of the first six chapters is still extremely weak. Lu Hsun, intentionally or not, adopts an indistinct writing style so that the readers do not pay attention to the question as to which dynasty or which period Ah Q was from. In addition, the author does not intend to flesh out Ah Q as a thoroughly developed “individual” described in detail, from his name to his age, living environment, and experiences as modern Western novels typically do. Ah Q, in Lu Hsun’s narrative, is less of an individual and more of a representative of a nation. This may have been the original intention of Lu Hsun, who devoted himself to criticizing nationalism, and it is also the main reason for which Ah Q has been regarded as an allegory for the Chinese nation, as Fredric Jameson has suggested. After analyzing *Diary of a Madman*, *Medicine*, *The True Story of Ah Q*, and many other novels by Lu Hsun, Jameson concludes that “Ah Q comes to serve as the allegory of a certain set of Chinese attitudes and modes of behavior.” He even says, “Ah Q is, allegorically, China itself” (Jameson 1986: 74).

However, this style undergoes major changes in “The Revolution” (Chapter VII):

On the fourteenth day of the ninth moon of the third year of the emperor Hsüan T’ung – on the same day that Ah Q had sold Chao Pai-yen the purse – after three strokes of the watchman’s drum, a large dark-sailed ship reached the Chao household’s landing place. (Lu 1946: 58)

“The 14th day of the ninth moon of the third year of the emperor Hsüan T’ung” is November 4, 1911. One month earlier, the Wuchang Uprising (October 10, 1911) had broken out, and the Revolution of 1911 had begun. Two months later (January 1, 1912), Sun Yat-sen became the Interim President and the Republic of China was established. That is to say, starting in Chapter VII, Lu Hsun suddenly places Ah Q in a historical moment suffused with drastic change on the threshold of Chinese modernity. In light of this, the temporal sign that represents an ordinary moment in the life of an individual, i.e., “on the same day that Ah Q had sold Chao Pai-yen the purse,” is immediately embedded in a grand historical narrative through the use of dashes. Furthermore, at the same moment that we become able to place him in a grand historical narrative, Ah Q’s individual life suddenly becomes saturated with detail. Moreover, the sign “after three strokes of the watchman’s drum” introduces temporal accuracy into this historical writing for the first time.

This way, we can see how the author begins to develop an extremely compact plot through the use of various temporal signs such as “dawn had almost arrived,” “not yet noon,” and “until the hour for lamp lighting” (Lu 1946: 58, 58, 62) in “The Revolution” (Chapter VII), as well as the absurd feeling that “everything was the same” “on the following day” (Lu 1946: 64, 64) after the Revolution. In “Barred from the Revolutionary Party” (Chapter VIII), the buildup of tension during the “revolution” has relaxed as “everything was the same.” This is the reason why, “a few days later, those who wrapped their queues about their heads gradually increased in number”; “during those few days, the ‘False Foreigner’ was the only one to go to the city” (Lu 1946: 69, 71). Eventually, there is no such “revolutionary” tension, and the impact of this grand historical narrative on Ah Q gradually disappears. We can see this in the reference to “one day, when, as usual, he had been whiling away the time in nonsense until evening” (Lu 1946: 75). This temporal sign refers to implicit meaning again. However, even though this reference to “one day” has an implicit meaning, it conveys to us that the action is occurring at least several days after the Revolution, and thus, the story remains closely linked to the grand historical narrative. What happens on the “one day” is that the Chao family is looted; Ah Q is arrested “four days later.” The relationship between these events conveys the compactness of linear time in the last three chapters, which could be described to have a strong plot.

It is not difficult to see that the process by which Ah Q starts to “come to a dead end” begins at “The Revolution” (Chapter VII). One of the most significant pieces of evidence for this from the text is that although there are some temporal signs in the first few chapters, they are all in a state of phantom reference, and they do not really impact the process of Ah Q’s individual life, let alone affect Ah Q’s experiences in “A Brief Account of Ah Q’s Victories.” By the “14th day of the ninth moon of the third year of the emperor Hsüan T’ung,” however, a real historical moment appears in the narrative of the novel, and makes an impact on the individual life of the fictional character Ah Q. It is from this moment that Ah Q starts to “come to a dead end.”

3 Semiological time: the concept of time and temporal semiotization

Our analysis of *The True Story of Ah Q* raises a question: How do the narrative functions of temporal signs work? Why does the temporal sign referring to “the 14th day of the ninth moon of the third year of the emperor Hsüan T’ung” change not only the narrative style of the novel but also Ah Q’s life? What is the difference

between this temporal sign and other temporal signs? Is it this difference that gives the sign in question the capacity for temporal evolvement and narrative function?

In his semeiotic theory, Peirce defined signs using two completely different methods: logic and significs. The logic perspective discusses the relationship between signs and representation objects. According to this typology, there are three kinds of signs: icons, indices, and symbols. The significs perspective discusses the relationship between signs and their interpretants and explores ways in which signs convey thoughts and meanings (Peirce 2014: 4). Zhao's semiotics align more closely with the latter; he says, "sign is a perception understood as carrying meaning: meaning can be expressed by sign, and the purpose of sign is to express meaning" (Zhao 2011: 1). In terms of the semioticity and semiotization of time, academics usually focus on the relationship between signs and their interpretants in the dimension of significs. From this perspective, time is not an objective issue or a representational object; rather, the sense of time is understood and recognized in accordance with event sequence, order, and alternation. The concept of time is shaped by way of its construction by a specific semiotic system. Therefore, anything we call "time" is actually a system of concepts carried by signs. Various time references imply various semiotic meanings. Roland Barthes has pointed out, "from the point of view of narrative, what we call time does not exist, or at least it only exists functionally, as an element of a semiotic system: time does not belong to discourse proper, but to the referent. Both narrative and language can only refer to semiological time" (Barthes 1975: 252). "Semiological time" here refers to the time that exists in semiotization, imbuing it with the essence of a temporal sign.

With regard to the significant event that he calls the "End of History," Jameson considers time and temporalities and is drawn to repeat an old question: "What is time?" (Jameson 2003: 695) From his perspective, the issues of time and temporalities received more attention as modernism rose. However, with the end of modernism, "time had become a nonperson and people stopped writing about it"; instead, space replaced it. Jameson's explanation seems overly simple and ambiguous. In Russell West-Pavlov's view, the problem of time occurred as early as the age of Enlightenment. West-Pavlov believes that "the recent history of time since the Enlightenment has evinced a progressive narrowing of the spectrum of temporal modes. The gradual streamlining of temporality down to universal linear time as the self-evident calibration of human existence has repressed and elided other possible temporal structurings of individual and global existence" (West-Pavlov 2013: 6). In other words, what actually causes the problem of temporality is not "the chaos of time" or "the diversity of concepts of time," but "the leading and dominance of linear time." It is "universal linear time" that brings about the unity of understanding the world and life of people. Therefore, Russell West-Pavlov has reached a conclusion similar to Jameson's concerning in the issues of time and

temporalities of 20th cultural theories: “By and large, however, time has been neglected by gender studies and cultural studies.” And where time continued to be studied, “it was merely ‘social time’, without the concept of time being itself” (West-Pavlov 2013: 6). In a word, “time” is not such a self-evident thing even though it is a “trap” that inevitably involves all human and nonhuman entities. Clock counting is a mere objective illusion. That is to say, time is just a concept or an ideology. Given this, it is necessary for us to not only “check the clocks” but also think about and inquire into the concept and significance behind the time.

Temporal signs are the semiotization of the concept of time, which means that time can be included in a cultural exchange through signs. In *The True Story of Ah Q*, different types of “temporal signs” are involved in the narrative of the novel: some refer to festivals such as the “Mid-Autumn Festival,” some imply seasons such as “spring day,” and some point to a specified time such as “three strokes of the watchman’s drum” or “until the hour for lamp lighting.” In addition, some temporal signs, like “on the following day” and “a few days later,” are used to indicate the sequence of events. Moreover, there are some temporal signs of real history, such as “the third year of the emperor Hsüan T’ung.” The references to multiple kinds of temporal signs position Ah Q to be in multiple time systems at once: Ah Q gets up early and goes to bed late, is accustomed to the rhythms of life and the changes of the four seasons in a year, and makes culture-bound references to time, such as the “Mid-Autumn Festival” and “the late age of 30.” This shows that Chinese traditional culture has made an unconscious impression on him, as his life is affected by “Hsüan T’ung” or the “Revolution” as well. These major historical events have emotional impacts on his unimportant life and could even be said to change his fate.

It is not difficult to discern that the process of temporal semiotization makes the hero (living an individual life) continuously accept the concepts of time. All actions and meanings of the hero are, as a rule, governed by temporal signs and influenced by various concepts of time. Prior to Chapter VII, Ah Q abides by the “natural time” concept or system of time (day and night, seasons) and by “folk time” (Mid-Autumn Festival), the essential characteristic of which is the “cycle or repetition of time.” Correspondingly, Ah Q has a flat personality and a stagnant life, which means that he does not grow with respect to nature and fate. If he were to continue this way, his character would never change, and his life would never stop. But beginning with Chapter VII, “historical time” officially emerges in the novel. The biggest difference between “the 14th day of the ninth moon of the third year of the emperor Hsüan T’ung” and the preceding temporal signs is that it is a true historical temporal sign associated with an extremely significant historical event in modern China. This “historical time” pushes Ah Q, a fictional character in the novel, into history. From this chapter on, the “cycle or repetition of time” has been broken, history has begun

to move forward without so much as a backward glance, and the character and life of the hero have escaped from the curse of “unchangeability” and “stagnation” into acquiring a capacity for growth and change.

4 The temporalization of signs: the narrative function of temporal signs

Now, the discussion of “the narrative functions of temporal signs” can be pushed further on. The next question is deciphering how the temporal sign of “the 14th day of the ninth moon of the third year of the emperor Hsüan T’ung” works in the narrative of the novel. Regarding the semiotics and temporalities, the following two aspects are involved in the issues of “the temporalities of signs.” The first one is the “semiosis process.” If a “process” is a state of temporal evolvement, the process of signification and interpretation has temporality; literary works take language as the medium and develop in a linear way that is also metonymic and syntagmatic. Therefore, this “semiosis process” has become the underpinning of literary comprehension. People first read literary texts diachronically using metonymics and syntagmatics, and then they determine the meaning of the texts synchronically using metaphors and paradigmatics. But this temporality is only represented as sequence and order, showing the before-and-after relationships among events. So, the semiosis process or semiotization enables its potential for developing the temporalities of signs.

The second aspect is the “semiotic narrative,” which addresses the issue of how signs are narrated. In narratology, time-related issues are included in the discussion of plots. In *A general narratology*, to take an example, Zhao analyzes “narrated time,” “narration time,” the “textual-extratextual time gap,” and so on in his discussion of the themes of “time and plot” in Part III. In addition to the aforementioned temporality issues that have been formally included in the discussion of semiotics, there is also a “semantic historic distance,” that is, a time gap between signs and the subjects who accept the signs. For example, people living in the 21st century will have a strong sense of history when they read about Qin bricks and Han tiles; references to these architectural elements are, therefore, signs. This sense of history cannot be included in the temporality of narratology, but is nevertheless forced into the process of semiosis process and semiotic narrative. Taking some literary works as examples, tomb-raiding novels, represented by *The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles*, by Lei Xu, usually describe adventures in ancient tombs from a modern perspective. The signs indicating the ancient character of the tombs in such novels reflect various elements of history, such as religion, sacrifices,

myths, and legends, including witchcraft, mechanisms, curses, divinations, and even magic and science fiction. Moreover, in the first novel of *The Three-Body Problem*, a science fiction series, Cixin Liu sets the background of the story in the period of China's Cultural Revolution and shoves the history of this era into Wenjie Ye's life all at once, with absurd results. With this as the backdrop, the Red Coast Base and the space exploration task create an atmosphere of luck in an "enclave" and a "refuge," shut off from the world to avoid disasters (though it is impossible to be completely isolated). Thus, Wenjie Ye's final decision to introduce alien civilization has a rationalized motivation owing to its realistic foundation. Furthermore, the Planetary Defense Security Department's China combat project in which Miao Wang participates is based in the "present," relying on existing scientific and technological capabilities and the V-suit Three-Body game in the present Trisolaran civilization. Therefore, all of the "present" is a major basis for the sense of reality of science fiction.

However, the foregoing description is only a general enumeration of the issues related to the temporalities of signs. Any sign may have all three of these kinds of temporal evolvment. If it is more specific to the temporal sign, the temporal evolvment would have its own characteristics. For example, because of the dominance of linear time as an important reference in the semiosis process, the sequence and order of temporal signs no longer remain arbitrary processes. With regard to narratology, while discussing narrative time, Tzvetan Todorov clearly points out that "the expression of time in narration is due to the difference between the time of story occurrence and the time of narrative." It is precisely because of the reference to "time of story occurrence" that readers and critics make judgments of "time distortion," "coherence, alternation, and insertion," and "writing time and reading time" for "narrative time" (Todorov 1989: 294–297). In 1966, Gérard Genette also put forth a strikingly similar idea. Studying the possible relationships between the time of a story and the time of its narrative, he determines that they may be classified in terms of "order" (including "anachronies," "reach and extent," "analepses," and "prolepses"), duration (including "anisochronies," "summary," "pause," "ellipsis," and "scene"), and "frequency," etc. (Genette 1983: 33–160). Thus, the evolvment of temporal signs presenting the characteristics of "time distortion by 'linear, natural or narrative,'" is caused by the distortion of the semiosis process by semiotic narrative and the deformation of narrative time corresponding to the story time. Additionally, if the semantic historic distance, which implies a relationship between the "readers' reading time" and the "fictional time" is considered, then the narrative functions of temporal signs would be more complex.

Take the classic opening of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as an example:

Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice. (Márquez 1984: 1)

This intriguing opening is widely praised. Márquez dramatically condenses the hero's life, showing a quick switching between time and space: the future, when he will be facing the firing squad; the past, when he was taken to discover ice; and the present, the time described in the narrative. At the end of the novel, Aureliano finally deciphers the narrative style of Melquíades' parchment manuscript about the Buendía family history: "events were not arranged in the usual chronological order, but the events of each day of the whole century were gathered together and they existed in a moment at the same time" (Márquez 1984: 1). If the family history narrated in the parchment manuscript is prophetic in nature, then the opening of the novel confirms this prophecy. The opening sentence shows two temporal signs with implicit meaning ("many years later," pointing to the future, and "that distant afternoon," pointing to the past), supplemented by two temporal signs with explicit meaning (the moment of "facing the firing squad," and the afternoon when "his father took him to discover ice"). If the temporal signs with implicit meaning here serve to condense the past and the future, creating powerful time tension, then the temporal signs with explicit meaning meld the two seemingly unrelated events together, creating a reflective perspective from which we can re-understand Aureliano's whole life. The narrative tension formed by the huge spatio-temporal distance between the two events and their vastly different natures has become the narrative keynote of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

However, this peculiar mode of writing has not yet been analyzed from a semiotics and narratology perspective. From the perspective of the "semiosis process," the time sequence of "many years later" and "the distant afternoon" is "anachronic" (not to be confused with the "anachronies" in narratology): the future temporal sign appears first, followed by the distant past such that the order of the two temporal signs in the sentence is the reverse of their actual chronological order. This sequence disruption of temporal signs gives readers a sense of time disruption. However, on the side of the "semiotic narrative," the temporal signs of "many years later" and "that distant afternoon" are at different levels of narration: "many years later," as Aureliano faces the firing squad, his "remembering" is the act in this sentence, and "that distant afternoon" is the content of "remembering," which is the object dominated by the act. Furthermore, the act of "remembering" is actually a kind of psychological behavior, which does not have the "function" characteristics as described by Propp in the usual sense. Because "many years later" indicates a future-oriented narrative, the "remembering" cannot be written in the past perfect tense. Thus, before the verb "remember" the author added the modal verb "was to" (English version), showing the characteristics of "modality," "fiction," and "conation." With the help of phenomenological methods, Zhao discusses the "textual intentionality" issue in narratology, trying to uncover the "modality-force" of narrative texts, and constructs a narrative model for three

tenses (past–present–future), which can be a theoretical supplement to this narrative phenomenon (Zhao 2013: 23–36).⁵ Thus a semio-narratology approach reveals that, in Márquez’s whole opening sentence, the overlapping of the two distant “moments” actually occurs in the prolepsis (was to) of “memory” (remember). Moreover, in this overlapping process, there is no “present” narrative moment. Therefore, readers in different times can freely reach the “narrative moment” (the “reading moment”),⁶ and put themselves on the ground to enter Márquez’s narrative situation. All readers are able to resonate with the two temporal signs of “many years later” and “the distant afternoon,” and their great semantic historic distance because of the uncertainty of the “present.”

The aforementioned example and its analysis may help improve our understanding of how important historical moments affect Ah Q’s life and fate in *The True Story of Ah Q*. In the novel, Lu Hsun adopts an extremely interesting sentence pattern: “on the 14th day of the ninth moon of the third year of the emperor Hsüan T’ung – on the same day that Ah Q had sold Chao Pai-yen the purse – after three strokes of the watchman’s drum.” From the perspective of the semiosis process, dashes play the role of juxtaposing two temporal signs to strengthen the simultaneity of the moments. The moment depicted outside the dashes is a real historical moment that can be traced back and verified; Lu Hsun takes a “complete time sequence” approach providing precise information on the “year, month, day, and hour” levels to make this moment accurate. This method, being typical of historical narration, is a way of expressing time that enhances the sense of historical reality. The moment depicted inside the dashes, meanwhile, is a fictional event in the novel. The practice of embedding a historical moment into a fictional plot has two functions: one is to obfuscate reality and fiction, and history and literature, allowing the hero Ah Q to become an illusion with historical authenticity; the other is to connect a momentous historical event to an unimportant incident in the life of an anonymous common man such as Ah Q. At this moment, a grand history begins that is related to personal destiny through various subsequent events – Ah Q eventually develops the will for “revolution,” False Foreigners abandon their old habits for new ones, and the Chao family is looted.

This narrative also shows us the attitudes of Ah Q and other people toward the major historical event, which exerts a profound influence on all of the villagers in Weichuang, including Ah Q. From the perspective of a semiotic narrative, these

⁵ See the first chapter, “Textual intentionality.” (Zhao 2013: 23–36).

⁶ The substitute relationship between “narrative moment” and “reading moment” has not been well developed in literary reading theory, but Christian Metz (1982) has made a wonderful analysis of the replacement between the projector and the camera in *The imaginary signifier: Psychoanalysis and film*.

juxtaposed temporal signs emphasize the unusual nature of the phenomenon in which “a large dark-sailed ship reached the Chao household’s landing place.” That is to say, the dark-sailed ship’s arrival not only bears information about this major historical event and becomes a symbol of the grand historical event (the Revolution of 1911), but also implies that Ah Q’s fate will be related to this history. Therefore, this moment of “after three strokes of the watchman’s drum” has become the narrative starting point of both a grand history and an individual life. Because *The True Story of Ah Q* appeared as a serial, the writing time and publishing time nearly coincided, with both occurring between December 4, 1921, and February 12, 1922. The novel’s story time was set as “the 14th day of the ninth moon of the third year of the emperor Hsüan T’ung,” which was November 4, 1911. From the perspective of “semantic historic distance,” there is a 10-year gap between story time and writing time, which saw the May Fourth New Culture Movement in 1919. Lu Hsun, the author, was affected by this Movement, which caused him to take a transcendent perspective to reflect on the Revolution of 1911. We readers from the 21st century, on the other hand, have experienced and learned about more than a century of historical changes since that time, including the founding of New China, the reform and opening up, and so on. Because of this, readers from different times have different “semantic historic distances” from *The True Story of Ah Q*, yet his story remains compelling, “Ah Q is an endless character.”

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Bionotes

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