Weisheng Tang*

Enchantment of things in the Chinese literary narrative tradition

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Abstract: The enchantment of things has been found in the long tradition of Chinese literary narrative. This article explores the three salient ways Chinese people have developed of thinking about and writing about their (imagined) relationship with the things around them, i.e., Bo Wu博物, Gan Wu感物, and Guan Wu观物. In the Bo Wu tradition, people described strange things that may or may not have existed in the actual world, and in doing so, they displayed either their extensive knowledge of these things, or the fertility of their imagination; in the Gan Wu tradition, people tried to express some kind of emotional attachment to things, and conceived of them as being able to feel like humans; and in the Guan Wu tradition, people tried to lose themselves in the contemplation of the world of things. The three Chinese traditions are reconsidered in this article in relation to the relevant Western lines of thought and particularly to emerging thing theory in Western philosophy.

Keywords: Bo Wu; Gan Wu; Guan Wu; thing theory

1 Introduction

A widely accepted notion concerning Chinese literature is that it is best characterized as “lyric,” rather than “narrative.” This is partly true. The most dominant literary mode in premodern China was undoubtedly poetry, while fictional prose was belittled as something like “petty talk.” “小说,” the term for “fictional narrative” in the Chinese language, literally means “insignificant words,” as compared to “传记,” the term for “historical prose,” which was greatly valued because it was traditionally regarded as a genre that would record what had actually happened in history.

Nevertheless, as many scholars have recently argued, China does have a narrative tradition of its own, even though this tradition is quite different from that of Western narrative (Dong 2012: 1). According to these scholars, Chinese narrative can be traced back to three thousand years ago, long before the establishment of the Qin dynasty (221 B.C.–207 B.C.), the first feudal empire in Chinese history (Fu 2021: 55). As nonhuman things have always been given a significant role in Chinese culture as a

*Corresponding author: Weisheng Tang, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China, E-mail: iamtwis@126.com

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whole, this article will focus on how they are imagined and treated in the long tradition of Chinese literary narrative. It is worth mentioning at the outset that throughout my discussion the term “narrative” is used rather broadly, including both prose and poetry as long as it contains some elements, however minimal, of narrativity.

2 Bo Wu: recording strange things

Setting aside ancient Chinese mythologies and philosophical writings, which also involve a large number of fictional stories, we may safely identify ‘strange tales,’ which emerged and then flourished in the Wei and Jin dynasties (220 A.D.–589 A.D.) as the beginning of Chinese fictional narrative. What is particularly relevant to my project here is ‘Bo Wu narrative,’ an important subgenre of “strange tales.” Literally, Bo Wu means ‘an extensive array of things,’ and Bo Wu narrative tells about a great variety of things, especially strange ones, which include far-off geographical places, plants with weird features, animals with outlandish appearances, and occasionally human beings with unusual looks, traits, and customs and habits.

《山海经》 ‘The Book of Mountains and Seas,’ written during the period of warring states (453 B.C.–221 B.C.), is often regarded as the forerunner of Bo Wu narrative. With its presentation of animals, plants, minerals, and monsters found (sometimes allegedly, sometimes actually) in various geographical locations of mountains and seas, the book, according to Fu (2021: 27), "should be read as the origin of modern ecological narrative.” It is perhaps an exaggeration to claim that ancient Chinese people living as early as 2,500 years ago could embrace any ecological awareness, yet their unique ways of telling stories about the things around them ushered in a narrative genre known as Bo Wu, which reached its peak in the Jin dynasty (266 A.D.–420 A.D.).

It is not without reason that scholars and writers in the Jin dynasty were so enthusiastic about telling stories about things, strange things in particular. Influenced by the traditional Confucian teaching that a virtuous man should have the ability to recognize and give names to all the things in the world, those who had received a formal education would never lose an opportunity to show off their knowledge of the things that surrounded them: the more strange things they could name, the better. This general tendency was fueled in the Jin dynasty by the fact that most scholars at the time, disappointed and disillusioned by the social unrest caused by numerous wars, chose to back away from any practical responsibilities and indulged themselves in metaphysical discussions of strange things and remote places and in so doing, demonstrated their extraordinary learning.

This kind of show-off rhetoric had two major consequences for Bo Wu narrative. First, the narrators were always trying to foreground the strangeness of things, and
second, the texts were always short and skeletal with very low narrativity (sometimes totally absent) and no other theme than, precisely, the existence of wondrous objects. In many cases, the narratives are simply listing things and their exotic features, as can be found in the following entries in 《博物志》 ‘Records of Strange Things’ compiled by Zhang Hua 张华, a prominent scholar in the Jin dynasty:

海上有草焉，名蒒，其实食之如大麦，七月稔熟，名曰自然谷，或曰禹余粮。

[There grows in the sea a kind of grass called “shi.” Its fruits taste like barley. It is fully grown in July. It is also known as “natural rice” or “Yu Yu Liang” [Rice Left over by King Yu].] (Zhang 2020: 97; my translation)

南海有鳄鱼，状似鼍，斩其头而乾之，去齿而更生，如此者三乃止。

[There live in the South Sea crocodiles that look like Chinese alligators. Even if you cut their heads off and dry them up, and remove their teeth, they do not die, unless you do this three times.] (Zhang 2020: 94; my translation)

常山之蛇名率然，有两头，触其一头，头至；触其中， 则两头俱至。孙武以喻善用兵者。

[There lives on Mount Changshan a snake called Shuai Ran. It has two heads. Touch one head, and the other head will turn around; touch its body, then both heads will turn around. General Sun Wu [a famous strategist in Chinese history] once compared it to a man good at fighting.] (Zhang 2020: 93; my translation)

What we have here are descriptions of imaginary plants and animals that read more like encyclopedia entries than like stories, though they do contain some minimal narrative elements. This is hardly surprising, though, considering that the purpose of the author was to flaunt his knowledge of the strange world of things. This “writing things for things’ sake” attitude is reflected even in those rare cases with embryonic storytelling. Here are the two narratives in Zhang Hua’s Records of Strange Things frequently quoted to show that the author had a fair craft of storytelling:

天地初不足， 故女娲氏练五色石以补其阙， 断鳌足以立四极。 其后共工氏与颛顼争帝， 而怒触不周之山， 折天柱， 绝地维。 故天后倾西北， 日月星辰就焉；地不满东南， 故百川水注焉。

[In the beginning, the sky had fallen and the earth had sunk. Nu Wa Shi [a legendary female hero] produced a five-colored stone to mend the sky, and then cut off the four legs of a colossal turtle and used them as columns to prop up the sky in all four directions. Later, in the struggle for power with Zhan Xu, Gong Gong Shi broke the columns in a violent fit of rage. That is why the sky now tilts toward the northwest, where the sun, the moon, and the stars assemble, and the earth sinks toward the southeast, in which direction all rivers flow.] (Zhang 2020: 20; my translation)
Tang creates narrative suspense by including a mystery and making the reader wait until markers of a beginning, complication, and ending. Furthermore, the storyteller demonstrates more complex storytelling techniques. It is well structured with clear markers of a beginning, complication, and ending. Furthermore, the storyteller creates narrative suspense by including a mystery and making the reader wait until
the end for its solution: the ox-herder does not say directly where the man is; the reader has to wait for Yan Junping to reveal the secret.

While these two texts present undeniable narrativity on the level of story, or fabula, their laconic narrative style, which is typical of the orally transmitted myths of native societies around the world, is a far cry from the discourse-level complexity of the literary narratives on which narratology is based. They do not engage the reader emotionally with the characters, they do not allow them to pass judgment on who is good and who is bad, and they do not offer motivations for the characters’ actions. For instance, we do not exactly know why the man in the second tale undertakes a journey that takes him to the Milky Way, and we are not given any clues as to why the ox-herder withholds information and asks the man to go to Yan Junping for help when he could easily reveal everything to the man himself. The multiple gaps in the two stories confront readers with a sense of impenetrable strangeness. This strangeness can be accounted for by the general lack of technical sophistication on the part of the writers of the time, but perhaps it has more to do with the writers’ narrative purposes. What the writers intend to do here is to tell the reader something spectacular they know about rather than to present some compelling or engaging stories. In other words, the two narratives here are told for the purpose of passing on some esoteric knowledge. More specifically, the writer of the first piece tells his story to show that he knows why the sky tilts northwestwards and the earth sinks southeastwards, while the writer of the second piece wants to show that he is able to explain a certain extraordinary celestial phenomenon.

This “writing things for things’ sake” style is characteristic of all Bo Wu narratives, but the style gradually fell out of fashion as human characters took up a more and more central position in Chinese storytelling. However, its impact is still quite strongly felt in narratives of later generations. For example, in 《同昌公主》, a famous piece in Tang Chuanqi or tales of the Tang dynasty (618 A.D.–907 A.D.), Princess Tongchang’s wedding is described as follows:

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[In the hall, there were beaded screens, curtains to keep off cold, chairs made of rhino hide, mats made of ivory, carpets with dragon and phoenix pattern [...]. Aside from this, there were partridge-shaped pillows, jade boxes, and quilts made of silk and embroidered with three thousand ducks [...]. In addition, there were jeweled curtains, silks disgorged by silkworms born in fire, and hairpins made of nine-colored jade [...].] (Su 2007: 835–837; my translation)
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This spectacular list of exotic things, which constitutes almost half of the text, is given in order to show that the regal wedding ceremony is grand, but to fulfill this purpose, the narrative obviously goes a little bit too far. The reader’s attention is to a large
extent drawn away from the ceremony by the enumeration, so that the effect of the whole narrative is that the writer is bragging about his knowledge of these things rather than showing the magnificence of Princess Tongchang’s wedding ceremony.

The technical device of the list has many different rhetorical and narratological applications. It fulfills what Meir Sternberg calls the Proteus Principle: a many-to-one correspondence between functions and forms. New Materialists, such as Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, and Ian Bogost profusely use the device, and it takes for them a particular meaning. For instance, in Latour’s *The Pasteurization of France* (1988), one finds the following paragraph:

I don’t know how things stand. I know neither who I am nor what I want, but others say they know on my behalf, others who define me, link me up, make me speak, interpret what I say, and enroll me. Whether I am a storm, a rat, a rock, a lake, a lion, a child, a worker, a gene, a slave, the unconscious, or a virus, they whisper to me, they suggest, they impose an interpretation of what I am and what I could be. (Latour 1988: 192, emphasis mine)

And similarly, while discussing what he terms “carnal phenomenology,” Harman writes,

Almost alone among contemporary philosophers, Lingis takes us outside all academic disputes and places us amidst coral reefs, sorghum fields, paragliders, ant colonies, binary stars, sea voyages, Asian swindlers, and desolate temples. As far as I am aware, he is also the one who coined the phrase “the carpentry of things.” (Harman 2005: 3, emphasis mine)

Bogost calls such lists “Latour litanies,” and believes that they can draw our attention toward things “with greater attentiveness” by “rebuffing the connecting powers of language” as well as contesting “the connecting powers of being itself” (Bogost 2012: 40–44).

Though both Bo Wu writers and recent New Materialists produce lists of things, they differ from each other in two essential ways. (1) Bo Wu writers mainly list strange things from remote places, while the lists of the New Materialists are far more heterogeneous: they include both the familiar and the unfamiliar, the concrete and the abstract; and (2) as we have seen, Bo Wu writers produce lists of things mainly for show-off purposes, as has been discussed above, while New Materialists do this in order to highlight “the inherent partition between things” (Bogost 2012: 40).

The fascination of Bo Wu authors with strange things can also be observed in Western cultures. In the Middle Ages, when the world was still partially unknown, travelers such as Marco Polo, or pseudo-travelers such as Sir John Mandeville (whose existence is nowadays considered legendary), brought back wondrous tales of the things they had seen in far-away countries. On the basis of the yarns of travelers, maps were decorated, either in the margins or in the blank spaces of unknown territories, with fantastic creatures supposed to live in these places, such as three-
legged people, one-eyed men, or hybrids of humans and animals. In the age of exploration in the 15th and 16th centuries, when new continents and maritime routes to the Far East were discovered, and when the world was finally circumnavigated, travelers brought back not only tales of increasing veracity, but also supported them with samples of the fauna, flora, and cultural artifacts of remote territories. These specimens spurred a passion for collecting. The Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680) gathered an enormous number of specimens and created a museum in Rome to display them. He also pioneered the so-called Cabinets of Wonders, or Wunderkammer, popular in the Baroque era with rulers and aristocrats, who used them to flaunt their wealth and their learning, not unlike the way Bo Wu authors used strange objects to show off their erudition. Wunderkammer were pieces of furniture specially designed to hold collections of exotic minerals, botanical specimens, animal skeletons, drawings of indigenous people, and manufactured objects. Fulfilling the roles of both encyclopedias and microcosms, these collections appealed to the public’s intense curiosity for the wonders of far-away places, and bore testimony to the amazing diversity of the world.

3 Gan Wu: feeling with things

While in the literary tradition of Bo Wu, writers tell stories in order to display their erudition, in the less superficial and more influential tradition of Gan Wu, things are regarded as the expression, or sometimes the sharer, of human feelings or personalities. Gan Wu, literally ‘putting emotions into things,’ is considered in ancient Chinese poetics not merely as a concrete writing technique, but as the essence of literary creation. All poetry, or all literature for that matter, according to this tradition, originates in some kind of emotion in the poet’s heart that needs to be expressed by finding an equivalent emotion in certain objects (Liu 2012: 519). This aesthetic idea is somewhat similar to T. S. Eliot’s “objective correlative,” which also deals with the way of expressing emotion. As Eliot puts it, “the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (Eliot 1932: 124–25). In his characteristically nebulous style, Eliot does not exactly define what “objective correlative” is, but it can be understood as a mediation for the poet’s emotion, and the “object” in the concept is one whose meaning is given by the poet. By contrast, Gan Wu is based upon the mythical belief held by ancient Chinese people that both humans and nonhumans are sentient and thus can share each other’s feelings and emotions. Thus in Gan Wu, the object and the poet are caught in the same emotional
mesh, as if they could communicate their emotion to each other. While in Eliot’s “objective correlative” the emotion is *evoked* by objects, in *Gan Wu* the poet is feeling *with* objects.

The following Ci (an indigenous poetic form in China) by Ma Zhiyuan 马致远 (1250–1321 A.D.) is often cited as an example of the importance of things in communicating the poet’s feelings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>秋思</th>
<th>秋思</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>枯藤老树昏鸦,</td>
<td>Over old trees wreathed with rotten vines fly evening crows;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>小桥流水人家,</td>
<td>Under a small bridge near a cottage a stream flows;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>古道西风瘦马。</td>
<td>On ancient road in the west wind a lean horse goes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>夕阳西下,</td>
<td>Westward declines the sun;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>断肠人在天涯。</td>
<td>Far, far from home is the heartbroken one.]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(“Autumn Thoughts”

秋思
枯藤老树昏鸦,
小桥流水人家,
古道西风瘦马。
夕阳西下,
断肠人在天涯。

(Ma 2004: 452, translation by Xu Yuanchong)

The most obvious disparity between the Chinese text and the translation lies in the fact that the translation contains a few verbs not found in the original, such as “wreath,” “fly,” “flow,” “go,” and “decline.” In fact, in the Chinese text, there is only a list of things: rotten vines, old trees, evening crows; a small bridge, a flowing stream, a cottage; an ancient road, the west wind, a lean horse, the setting sun, a heartbroken man. Here, we have a male character and perspective (though we are not sure whether the perspective belongs to the man or to some entity standing outside of the scene), but there is no substantial action involved (except for, perhaps, the act of looking). All the things mentioned in the poem point toward the final focus, namely, the heartbroken man. What makes this poem memorable is the expression of a man’s deeply felt sadness through the common things that surround him. These things, as it were, experience the same loneliness and forlornness as the man.

This tradition of connecting things to humans through emotion started very early in Chinese literary history; ancient Chinese writers therefore knew very well how to present things as if they could share human personalities.

Next I shall first discuss a poem by Liu Changqing 刘长卿 which seems to be telling a story.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>《逢雪宿芙蓉山主人》</th>
<th>《逢雪宿芙蓉山主人》</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>日暮苍山远,</td>
<td>At sunset hillside village still seems far;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>天寒白屋贫。</td>
<td>Cold and deserted the thatched cottages are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>柴门闻犬吠,</td>
<td>At wicket gate a dog is heard to bark.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>风雪夜归人。</td>
<td>With wind and snow I come when night is dark.]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(“Staying in Lotus Hill on a Snowy Night”

逢雪宿芙蓉山主人
日暮苍山远,
天寒白屋贫。
柴门闻犬吠,
风雪夜归人。

(Liu 2004: 302; translation by Xu Yuanchong)
The first two lines of the poem are quite similar to “Autumn Thoughts,” producing a list of things without any verbs (though the translation includes two verbs, namely, “seems” and “are”): the setting sun, the distant gray hillside, the cold weather, the white thatched cottage. The last two lines indicate that something does take place in the poem: the dog barks at the wicket gate, and a man returns home in wind and snow. These events, however minimal, give the poem a greater degree of narrativity than “Autumn Thoughts.” But since the poem ends at this point, the reader has no clue where the man is returning from, nor what he is going to do after he returns. The mention of the setting sun, the distant hillside, and the barking dog may give contemporary readers a sense of mystery, yet the mystery and its consequences are never elucidated. Put together, the sun, the hillside, the dog, the gate, the wind, the snow, and the man create a static picture. The poem is, therefore, more a revelation of the man’s personality and emotion than a report of his actions. One possible reading, one that I endorse, is that the poem presents the man (or the speaker in the poem) as a noble-minded hermit who chooses to stay away from the corrupted world by living in a poor and remote hillside village. If this interpretation is correct, then things in the poem, including the setting sun, the distant hillside, the cottage, the dog, the gate, the wind and snow, do not merely play the role of describing a landscape and revealing an atmosphere, but literally blend with the personality of the man. Rather than being properties of the environment in which the man’s actions take place, the things, the human, and the dog are caught in the same affective network.

The influence of this tradition is strongly felt in Chinese narrative of the subsequent generations. In fact, “人物,” the term that has been used in Chinese language since ancient times to designate “character/protagonist,” is the combination of 人 ‘humans’ and 物 ‘things.’ This ideogram clearly demonstrates that humans and things are inseparable in traditional Chinese thought. In both narrative and poetry, things are often conjoined to human characters as if they were an extension of their individuality. Humans and things stand in the same relation as the two souls described in John Donne’s famous poem “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” which are said to be not two but one.

More generally, in Chinese narratives of that period, readers can hardly think of specific human characters without thinking of an object that goes with them. Guan Yu 关羽, the most renowned warrior in 《三国演义》 《Romance of the Three Kingdoms,’ a widely acclaimed classic Chinese novel, is invariably associated with the dragon-shaped weapon he uses to fight his enemies, and Zhuge Liang 诸葛亮, a legendary strategist in the same novel, always wears his silken headcloth and holds a feathered fan in his hand. The use of the dragon-shaped weapon to refer to Guan Yu, and of the silken headcloth and feathered fan to refer to Zhuge Liang is more than metonymy, because these things are invested with the same mysterious power that characterizes their owners. This power of things can play an active role in the plot. 美猴王 ‘Monkey King’ in 《西游记》 《Journey to the West,’ another classic Chinese
novel, carries a weapon called 如意金箍棒 ‘a golden cudgel’ wherever he goes, and the cudgel can become as big as a tower and as small as a needle, while Monkey King himself assumes different shapes and sizes. One is reminded of how the heroine of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* can become taller than a house or smaller than a mouse. But the objects around Alice remain unaffected, and seem withdrawn in their impenetrable otherness, while the cudgel is treated as an organic part of Monkey King’s body, growing and shrinking with it.

The Western literary tradition closest to *Gan Wu* is Romantic poetry, as represented in England by William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. “All good poetry,” as Wordsworth famously asserts, “is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1989: 57), and it “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1989: 73). This romantic definition of poetry shares *Gan Wu*’s concern with human emotion and nature (and things in nature), yet they differ from each other at least in one significant way. When a poet is overwhelmed by the “powerful feeling,” according to Wordsworth, he is not able to articulate the truth and beauty of nature; it is only when the feeling cools down that the poet can assemble words to do nature justice. In other words, it is necessary for the poet to keep a certain personal distance from his experience before he can write it down. As Wordsworth writes in the last stanza of his “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”:

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They [the daffodils] flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

Here, though the poet feels inspired at the thought of the daffodils, the flowers remain distinct from him. As a memory rather than a directly experienced presence, the daffodils are separated by time from the poet. Moreover, he thinks of them as an instrument for filling his heart “with pleasure.” By contrast, the distance between subject and objects is minimized in *Gan Wu*. As “Autumn Thoughts” and “Staying in Lotus Hill on a Snowy Night” suggest, the poet’s persona merges with the surrounding objects, which share the poets’ emotions without being anthropomorphized.

### 4 Guan Wu: abandoning oneself to things

If in the *Bo Wu* tradition we see ancient Chinese people trying to record strange things to satisfy their curiosity about the world, and in the *Gan Wu* tradition we see
them trying to engage in an emotional interaction with things, then in the Guan Wu tradition, which is also an important school of ancient Chinese thought, we see writers trying to abandon themselves to things.

This train of thought started with Daoism’s advocacy of 无为 ‘non-action,’ which is rooted in the belief that human beings should not take any action to change the world. Instead, they should always remain passive, just like the grass in the field, because any action taken by human beings will violate dao 道, the supreme and ultimate law of the universe, which remains, according to Daoism, forever withdrawn and inaccessible. This idea was later developed and modified by Confucian idealists in the Song dynasty (960 A.D.–1127 A.D.). No longer preaching “non-action,” these idealists nevertheless tried to screen away human emotions and desires in order to achieve recognition of li 理, their term for the universal truth. Rather than associate the falling blossom and flowing water with the ephemerality or transience of human existence, something poets of the Gan Wu tradition would do, Confucian idealists would declare that these are just natural phenomena governed by some immutable li.

By turning their focal attention to dao and li, Daoism and Confucian idealism, though different in many ways, are both hostile to fictional literature, just as Plato, the Greek idealist, criticizes poetry as the second-order imitation of ideal forms. Yet this does not mean that Daoists and idealists do not rely on their imagination in their works; what they object to is the kind of literature that deals with surface reality, especially when this reality is limited to human perceptions. In order to transcend the restriction of human perspective and to get to the unspeakable dao of things, where no humans exist, Zhuangzi 庄子, the early founder of Daoism, demonstrates the wildest imagination in his philosophical prose, as if he were writing, in Meillassoux’s words, “with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory – of being entirely elsewhere” (Meillassoux 2008: 17). Suffice it to cite the opening few lines of his 《逍遥游》 ‘A Happy Excursion’:

北冥有鱼，其名为鲲。鲲之大，不知其几千里也；化而为鸟，其名为鹏。鹏之背，不知其几千里也；怒而飞，其翼若垂天之云。是鸟也，海运则将徙于南冥。南冥者，天池也。《齐谐》者，志怪者也。《谐》之言曰：‘鹏之徙于南冥也，水击三千里，抟扶摇而上者九万里，去以六月息者也。’

[In the northern ocean there is a fish, called the k’un, I do not know how many thousand li [one li is equivalent to 500 m] in size. This k’un changes into a bird, called the p’eng. Its back is I do not know how many thousand li in breadth. When it is moved, it flies, its wings obscuring the sky like clouds. When on a voyage, this bird prepares to start for the Southern Ocean, the Celestial Lake. And in the Records of Marvels we read that when the p’eng flies southwards, the water is smitten for a space of three thousand li around, while the bird itself mounts upon a great wind to a height of ninety thousand li, for a flight of six months’ duration.]

(Zhuang 2009: 60, translation by Lin Yutang)
K’un 鲲 ‘a fish’ and its later metamorphosis as P’eng 鹏 ‘a bird’ are so inconceivably huge that they can be regarded as “hyperobjects” as defined by Timothy Morton. Hyperobjects, according to Morton, are “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans [...]. The hyperobject is not a function of our knowledge: it’s hyper relative to worms, lemons, and ultraviolet rays, as well as humans” (Morton 2013: 1–2). K’un and P’eng do not belong to the human realm, nor are they subject to human manipulation. In this sense, as hyperobjects, K’un and P’eng are symbolic of dao, which exists “on a foreign territory” in a free state unconstrained by human perception.

This total abandonment of the human world to the ultimate truth of things has found its expression in Chinese idyllic poetry, li-preaching poetry, and landscape paintings. In these art forms, humans disappear completely or recede into the background, and they are replaced by natural things such as mountains, rivers, flowers, birds, and implicitly, by the unspeakable and taciturn “ultimate truth” behind these things.

One such idyllic poem is 《饮酒其五》 ‘Drinking (V)’, a poem composed by Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 (365–427 A.D.), a poet and hermit who lived in the Eastern Jin dynasty (317 A.D.–420 A.D.). The poem, which presents a considerable degree of narrativity, reads as follows:

《饮酒其五》
结庐在人境，
而无车马喧。
问君何能尔?
心远地自偏。
采菊东篱下，
悠然见南山。
山气日夕佳，
飞鸟相与还。
此中有真意，
欲辩已忘言。

[“Drinking (V)”
Within the world of men I make my home,
Yet din of horse and carriage there is none;
You ask me how this quiet is achieved—
With thoughts remote the place appears alone.
While picking asters ’neath the Eastern fence
My gaze upon the Southern mountain rests;
The mountain views are good by day or night,
The birds come flying homeward to their nests.
A truth in this reflection lies concealed,
But I forget how it may be revealed.]

(Tao 1983: 86; translation by Gladys Yang)

Though living within the “world of men,” the speaker enjoys the peace and quiet that belongs to him, because his thoughts are “remote” from the human world, or “being elsewhere,” to use Meillasoux’s term. His thoughts focus on natural things such as asters, mountain, and birds. In other words, the speaker is surrendering himself to the natural world. Furthermore, unlike poets of the Gan Wu tradition, the speaker is not trying to project his emotions onto objects. As the last two lines suggest, the speaker feels there is “a truth” in these things, yet he does not know “how it may be revealed,” which suggests that the truth of things is deep and inaccessible by way of language or by any other means.
Li-preaching poetry is a poetic genre which developed and flourished in the Song dynasty (960 A.D.–1127 A.D.). Influenced by Confucian idealism, li-preaching poetry aims at reaching the universal li of the world by driving human emotion out of poetry. According to Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011–1077 A.D.), an idealist philosopher and poet, “if we look for thingness in things, we get their nature; if we look for ourselves in things, we get our emotions. The nature of things is universal and bright, while human emotions are biased and obscure” (Shao 1232; my translation). Here is a poem by Cheng Hao 程颢 (1032–1085 A.D.), who was himself a representative of Confucian idealism:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>《秋日》</th>
<th>[“Autumn Days”]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>闲来无事不从容，</td>
<td>When at my leisure, I run affairs at pace slow,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>睡觉东窗日已红。</td>
<td>Oft when I rise, the sun hath reddened my east window.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>万事静观皆自得，</td>
<td>All things manifest themselves when observed in silence,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>四时佳兴与人同。</td>
<td>To us the four seasons their beauty equally show.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>道通天地有形外，</td>
<td>The universal truth permeates through heaven and earth,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>思人风云变态中。</td>
<td>And deep thoughts like wind and cloud will constantly flow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>富贵不淫贫贱乐，</td>
<td>Tho’ poor, be contented; when rich, do not indulge,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>男儿到此是豪雄。</td>
<td>A man does this, and he is a great hero.]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Cheng 2012: 120; my translation)

Both “Autumn Thoughts,” discussed earlier, and “Autumn Days,” quoted here, deal with a specific season of the year, yet they are diametrically opposed to each other in their treatment of things. In “Autumn Thoughts,” Autumn is described as lonely and forlorn, just as the traveling poet feels, while in “Autumn days,” the same season provides an opportunity for the poet to reflect upon the universal truth of the world. Though the physical presence of the poet, together with such words as “leisure,” “the sun,” and “window” in the first two lines reminds us of the customary beginning of a Gan Wu poem, we soon realize that the two lines, with their emphasis on the poet’s carefree state of mind, are preparing us for the revelation of his “universal truth.” What runs through all the things in this poem, including “the sun,” “window,” “the four seasons,” “heaven and earth,” “wind and cloud,” is not human emotion, but the mysterious “universal truth” and “deep thoughts.”

山水画 Chinese landscape painting, or shan-shui painting ‘mountain-water painting,’ is the visual art form that best embodies the Guan Wu tradition. Originating in the Jin dynasty (266 A.D.–420 A.D.), Chinese landscape painting gained its full momentum in the Song 宋 dynasty (960 A.D.–1279 A.D.) and has become an integral part of Chinese art ever since. Chinese landscape painting typically foregrounds mountains and rivers instead of human beings, and they are represented as having a spiritual existence of their own. One of the best-known landscape paintings
is 《早春圖》 'The Early Spring' by Guo Xi 郭熙, who lived in the Song dynasty (Figure 1).

In *The Early Spring*, all that meets the eye are mountains, trees, streams, and rivers, with only a few almost invisible dots standing for human figures. The mountains are presented from various perspectives: they are high when viewed from the bottom; they are distant when viewed from afar; and they are deep and mysterious when viewed from the opposite side. The combination of multiple perspectives in a single painting, typical of all Chinese landscape paintings, gives us a panoramic view of the natural world, thus lending variety and vividness to it. More importantly, this variety and vividness belongs to nature itself, for humans are intentionally reduced to extreme insignificance in the painting.

At first glance, this idea of abandonment to the truth of things is similar to that proposed by contemporary philosophers such as Graham Harman. One of the major tenets of Object-Oriented Ontology, as developed by Harman, is that the reality of
things is infinitely withdrawn and cannot be made present. As he puts it in his 2011 book *The quadruple object*, “the eidetic features of any object can never be made present even through the intellect, but can only be approached indirectly by way of allusion, whether in the arts or in the sciences” (Harman 2011: 28).

While Chinese poets and philosophers share this idea of abandonment with some of their Western counterparts, it is also where they begin to diverge from each other. Though they recognize that the reality of things cannot be made present, Harman and his cohorts nevertheless embark on the “mission impossible” of addressing this reality, just as their ancient Greek forerunners such as Plato and Aristotle did, albeit in different ways. Defining this project as “ontography” (or, being-writing), Harman proposes that we can catch a glimpse of the “real object” by tuning in to the gaps that exist between “real objects” and their “sensual features.” According to Harman, it is by attending to these gaps that “all the arts, literature included,” can “hint at the reality” of things (Harman 2012: 183–203). By contrast, the recognition of the mystery of things leads ancient Chinese philosophers away from the truth-seeking project and directs them toward ethics. Since we shall never be able to know the truth, according to Daoism, we should give up trying and live with this ineptitude. The Confucian idealists in the Song dynasty, while confirming the immutability of the *li* of natural world, arbitrarily claim that the *li* of natural world also works in the human world. They then prescribe a whole set of ethical rules, under the name of the *li* of heaven, for people to follow strictly. A close scrutiny of the last two lines of “Autumn Days” by Cheng Hao is revealing. After claiming that some universal truth runs through “heaven and earth,” the poet immediately adds, “Tho’ poor, be contented; when rich, do not indulge, / A man does this, and he is a great hero,” indicating this precept about being poor and rich is exactly the “truth” he is talking about. Obviously, Cheng Hao attempts here a shift from universal truth to ethical truth, perhaps rightly so, because he is first and foremost a Confucian idealist.

5 Conclusion

Enchanted by the things around them, Chinese people have developed multiple ways of thinking about and writing about them, among which *Bo Wu*, *Gan Wu*, and *Guan Wu* are most salient. In the *Bo Wu* tradition, people described strange things that may or may not have existed in the actual world, and in doing so, they displayed either their extensive knowledge of these things or the fertility of their imagination; in the *Gan Wu* tradition, people tried to express some kind of emotional attachment to things, and conceived of them as being able to feel like humans; and in the *Guan Wu* tradition, people tried to lose themselves in the contemplation of the world of things. The first two traditions are strongly affected by human subjectivity, while
subjectivity is vastly diminished in the last tradition by its ideal of self-abandonment and its purpose of living a “good” life, rather than finding out the “truth” of things. The three traditions have always affected Chinese thought, and to a large extent, they help define Chinese literature.

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**Bionote**

**Weisheng Tang**
Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China
iamtws@126.com

Weisheng Tang (b. 1969), PhD, is a professor of comparative literature at the College of Foreign Languages and a research fellow at the Institute for Narrative Studies, Jiangxi Normal University. He specializes in narrative theory, comparative literature studies, and modern and contemporary British and American literature.