

A NEW APPROACH TO *HSIAO-SHUO P'ING-TIEN*:  
*HSIAO-SHUO P'ING-TIEN* AND AESTHETIC RESPONSE

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摘 要

本文主張運用伍福岡·伊瑟的美學反應理論探討中國傳統的小說評點。第一部分指出以往的研究方式往往忽略閱讀行為中的時間因素以及評點在閱讀過程中的作用。第二部分分析伊瑟的現象學文學觀，及其對時序 (temporality)、游移不定 (indeterminacy)、互為主體性 (intersubjectivity) 和文學傳播的三元結構 (作品、讀者、二者之互動 interaction) 之重視。第三部分強調，伊瑟對時序、互動的重視，正適合說明中國傳統的小說評點。讀者在閱讀評點本時，一面與作品互動，一面與批語互動，一面更與小說與批語之間的互動而互動 (批語係批者與小說互動的產物)。本文之所以主張採用伊瑟的理論，主要在於他的基本假設與中國傳統的小說評點家相近，都肯定閱讀過程的重要。

I

*Hsiao-shuo p'ing-tien* 小說評點 (the accompanying commentary on Chinese literary narrative) is often regarded as a unique phenomenon in the history of narrative criticism. It appears in a particular form which enjoys a long history and comprehends the exegesis, explication, interpretation, and criticism of classical texts. The literary *p'ing-tien* owes its emergence and development to the literary critics' attention to the *fa* 法 (compositional or rhetorical methods, techniques, and devices) that evolved in the T'ang and Sung Dynasties, the establishment of the *k'e-chu* 科舉 (the civil service examination) as the way to recruit talented people for the government, and the designation of the *pa-ku-wen* 八股文 (the eight-legged essay) as the set style for examination papers in the Ming Dynasty. Closely related to literary appreciation, the examination system, and the textbook industry, it is an aggregate of literary, pedagogical, social, economic, and political purposes (Ch'en Wan-i 39-47; K'ang 35-41; Yu Hsin-hsiung, 112-18).

If this kind of literary *p'ing-tien* is established as a paradigm (Kuhn),<sup>1</sup> the revolution and emergence of a new paradigm can be detected late in the Ming Dynasty in the literati's disgust with the texts and styles standardized and institutionalized

by the social, political, and literary systems as well as in their admiration for popular literature and literary texts expressive of the authors' *hsing-ling* 性靈 (true feelings and personality). This shift of paradigm is usually assumed to be Li Chih's 李贄 undertaking. Characterized by a preference for originality, unconventionality, and grotesqueness, Li tried to break loose from the chains (in the double sense of "links" and "fetters") of the standard classics, which were themselves the products of convention and institutionalization, and to establish a new paradigm with its emphasis on popular literature, especially the vernacular narrative (Ch'en Wan-i 42-43; Ch'en Chin-chao 69-73; Wang, *Chin* 15-21, 40).

The establishment of this new paradigm is, by definition, a milestone in the history of Chinese literature. Traditional scholars and men of letters used to associate popular literature with mediocrity and vulgarity. With the appearance of the new paradigm, people could now talk openly about the merits of popular literature and even place it on an equal footing with other established genres. The literary vision immediately broadened. If Li is honored as the builder of a new paradigm, his followers widen this seldom trodden path into a boulevard.

These traditional Chinese critics, who were sometimes contemporaneous with, but more often generations later than, the producers of the texts, have played a very important, if not decisive, role in the reception history of these literary texts. Mostly presented in the form of prefatory discussions, marginal remarks, and interlinear notes, these commentaries are representative of the traditional Chinese critics' interpretive strategies. Generally speaking, prefatory discussions, coming before the narrative proper, attempt to orient the readers' processing of the text in the way conceived and dictated by the critics. Marginal remarks often have some bearing on the structure of the narrative or the analysis of a special point. Interlinear notes focus on the identification and assessment of the author's techniques, the explication of a usage or expression, as well as the appreciation of the merits of a sentence, a phrase, or a word. In addition to demonstrating the commentators' individual readings of the texts, these commentaries are at best canonical and normative, as evidenced not only by the alleged objectives of the critics themselves, but also by the general acceptance of the commentaries in the centuries when those editions carrying such commentaries were frequently the most available or authoritative editions.

Produced in a particular historical and cultural context, these commentaries indicate, among other things, the critics' criteria which either dovetail the contem-

porary cultural climate and literary milieu or guide and dictate the intended readers' literary appreciation and taste. And the circulation and, not seldom, the popularity of these commentary-carrying editions, together with their later near extinction, show that the commentaries themselves are a subject of great interest.

There are two opposing views about this particular type of Chinese literary criticism. In his study of the *Shui-hu-chuan* 水滸傳 at the turn of the present century, Hu Shih cautions his readers against Chin Sheng-t'an's 金聖歎 mechanistic literary criticism technically, thematically, and ideologically (61-67, 105-09). Half a century later, Yueh Heng-chun laments the two traditional ways of Chinese narrative criticism as being guilty of didacticism and randomness—the former represented by Feng Meng-lung 馮夢龍, and the latter, by Li Chih and Chin Sheng-t'an. In her opinion, Li and Chin's literary criticism goes beyond the simple-minded impressionistic criticism, yet is featured by “the lack of logicity and deduction” (3-4). Chang Chien positions the *p'ing-tien* under the *yin-hsiang fa* 印象法 (the impressionistic method) in his categorization of the eleven traditional Chinese critical modes. “Strictly speaking,” he judges, “this is a great trap in Chinese literary criticism” (18).

On the other hand, many scholars, Hu Shih included, avail themselves of the *p'ing-tien* for various purposes. For convenience' sake, I will designate the following four levels or approaches, each based on and transcending the previous one(s): historical-positivistic, literary-aesthetic, theoretical, and epistemic-metacritical. The historical-positivistic level is best exemplified by the studies of the *Chih-p'i* 脂批 (Chih-yen-chai's 脂硯齋 Commentary on the *Hung-lou-meng* 紅樓夢, or the *Dream of the Red Chamber*). To this type of scholars, Chih-yen-chai's commentary supplies valuable clues to the identity of the author(s), the identity of the commentator(s), the raw materials of this narrative, the biographical and autobiographical data of the author(s) and the commentator(s), the authenticity of the commentary, the authorial intention, the author's creative process, the author's original plan for the missing forty chapters, the intimate relation between the author(s) and the commentator(s), the transmission and evolution of the earlier texts and so forth. The purpose of this approach is a reconstruction of the historical reality.

Based on and departing from the first type of scholars, the literarily- and aesthetically-oriented scholars treat the commentary as an expression of the critic's literary concept. Therefore, Ch'en Chin-chao's study of Li Chih's analysis of the characterization and criticism of social reality in his *Shui-hu-chuan* commentary is under the general title of “Li Chih's Literary Concept Expressed in His Commentary

on the *Shui-hu-chuan*" (82-102). John Wang finds it necessary to specify his unconventional study of the *Chih-p'i* as "a literary study" and enumerates thirty-four techniques employed by the author and pointed out by Chih-yen-chai ("Chih"). A recent study of this sort is Cheng Ming-li's systematization of Mao Tsung-kang's 毛宗崗 Commentary on the *San-kuo yen-i* 三國演義 (*The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*) in terms of *chang-fa* 章法 (structure and texture). The goal of these scholars is to construct from the scattered commentaries a system of the individual critic's literary concepts and critical practices.

The third kind of scholars aim at the elevation of the *p'ing-tien* to a theoretical level upon which the House of Chinese Narrative Criticism can be built. In one of the pioneering studies on Chang Chu-p'o's 張竹坡 Commentary on the *Chin-p'ing-mei* 金瓶梅 (*The Golden Lotus*), David T. Roy asserts that "[Chang's] 'How to Read the *Chin-p'ing-mei*' . . . is the closest thing that I know of in the Chinese language to a poetics of the novel" and that "his commentary on the *Chin-p'ing-mei*, taken as a whole, is the most illuminating critical analysis in depth of any Chinese novel with which I am familiar in any language" (122). And Andrew Plaks also observes:

In the Chinese case, the practice of printing novel texts together with marginal or interlinear commentaries, and with extensive prefatory and post-chapter discussions, highlights the fact that these works were intended from the very start to be read with critical reflection. At its shallowest, this critical material amounts to little more than hit-or-miss remarks on the style or content of a given passage; but at its best it includes full-scale attempts to set forth the meaning of the works in question, using allegorical or other types of interpretive schemes. Moreover, in the writings of such great critics as Chang Chu-p'o, Chin Sheng-t'an, and Mao Tsung-kang, we find a sophisticated adaptation of the language of Chinese criticism of prose, poetry, and painting which, with fuller study, may in fact provide us with a comprehensive poetics of the Chinese novel. ("Full-length" 174-75)

Valid and illuminating to a certain extent, these three approaches, albeit with different purposes, usually assume the forms of explication, systematization, justification, defense, and even vindication. But in their reconstructing process, they have to, more or less, sacrifice some of the most salient features of these commentaries, such as temporality, apparent randomness, and the text's-and-commentary's effect on the reader. Consequently, they are somewhat confined to explaining the reasons, generally historical, political, social, literary, and aesthetical, behind this critical performance without taking a great stride towards the epistemic or metacritical speculations upon its very nature or function.

The present study is a modest proposal for an epistemic-metacritical investigation into the *hsiao-shuo p'ing-tien* by adopting Wolfgang Iser's theory of aesthetic response as its conceptual scheme. It is epistemic in the sense that it suggests an approach to the traditional critics' attempt to influence and control, via their *p'ing-tien*, the intended readers' understanding and interpretation of the narrative; it is metacritical in the sense that the epistemic investigation will provide us with a theoretical grounding from which to reappraise not only the *p'ing-tien*, but also the criticism performed on the previous three levels. However, I want to stress once again that these four levels are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive.

As a matter of fact, two of Hu Shih's contemporaries have already affirmed the pedagogical and pragmatic effect of the commentary-carrying edition on its reader. Liu Fu remarks in his preface to a photolithographic edition of Chin Sheng-t'an's *Shui-hu-chuan* that "the common reader's literary taste will be greatly improved after his attentive reading of not only the text, but also Chin's circles, dots, and comments" (2c). Chou Tso-jen bears witness to the enjoyment of reading this kind of edition:

Of all commentaries on fiction, Chin Sheng-t'an's are of course the best. . . . When I read the *Shui-hu-chuan*, I pay equal attention to the main text and to the comments. It is like eating white fungus (*pai mu-erh*, a Chinese delicacy); they taste even better eaten with soup. (Qtd. in Wang, *Chin* 81)

Their observations can be explained by Ch'en Chin-chao's remark that in reading the commentary-carrying edition, "[t]he criticism is combined with the reading process. Therefore, in his act of reading, the reader's sensitivity and experience can both be promoted to a rational level" (72). A scholar of the seventeenth-century Chinese narratives also mentions the importance of the critical prefaces and commentaries and condemns the deletion of them in the later editions of these narratives (Hegel 78-79). Furthermore, John Wang observes that Chin Sheng-t'an's commentary is reader-oriented (39 and 42). And Eugene Eoyang is perhaps the first scholar who suggests the possibility of applying Iser's theory to the study of the relation between author and audience in the Chinese literary context (68).

In the past decade and a half, the swing of the pendulum of Western literary criticism rebounds from the aesthetic, ahistorical study of the text as "monument" to the study of the text as "sign" or "appeal structure" (Fokkema and Kunne-Ibsch 136). Instead of concentrating on the literary text as an autonomous object with its aesthetic function, as presumed by New Criticism, critics have come to emphasize

the pragmatic function of a literary text in which the receiving subject in the communicatory structure of author-text-reader plays a major role. The truism "books are written to be read" takes on a new significance according to which literary pragmatics, rather than semantics or syntactics, is the aim to be pursued (Iser, *Act* 54). And the literary text's effect on the reader, no longer the "affective fallacy" to be condemned is dubbed as "affective stylistics" worthy of critics' special attention (Fish, *Is* 21-67).

With their common emphasis on the effect of the literary text on the reader, the reader-response critics, as a matter of fact, are under many different and conflicting banners.<sup>2</sup> After a careful deliberation on the presuppositions and potential of the theories developed by these critics as well as the materials to be dealt with, I have decided to take Iser's theory of aesthetic response as my theoretical framework. For his concept of the communicatory structure is very congenial (and comprehensive) to the nature of classical Chinese narrative criticism which appears as accompanying commentaries on narrative texts (see Section Three for a detailed discussion). Moreover, his emphasis on the interaction between text and reader enables us to describe (1) what characterizes the traditional commentaries made and popularized by these critics in their confrontation with and transmission of the texts and (2) how these critics play their roles as self-ordained ideal readers in relation both to the texts and to later readers. In one word, these traditional critics' dialectical and dialogical relation with the producers of the texts (in this case the critics being the recipients of the texts) and with later readers (in this case the critics, together with the authors, being the producers and preservers of the texts and the accompanying commentaries) not only manifests their literary canons, conventions, presuppositions, and critical practices—in one word, their historicity at work—but also demonstrates the delicate relation of author-critic-reader in a special sense.

## II

Wolfgang Iser's theory of aesthetic response is developed over a period of one decade and is eloquently represented by three of his theoretical writings—"Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction" (1971), "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" (1972),<sup>3</sup> and, most comprehensively, *The Act of Reading* (1978). With his admirable erudition and bold transplantation, Iser draws disciplines as various as phenomenology, speech-act theory, general systems theory,

information theory, gestalt psychology, hermeneutics, social psychology, psychoanalysis, semiotics. . . into the formulation of his own grand theory. A closer scrutiny reveals that his theory is essentially based on two branches of learning: (1) the phenomenological concept of art with its emphases on temporality, indeterminacy, intersubjectivity, and the triadic structure of literary communication (the artistic pole or the text, the aesthetic pole or the reader, and the interaction between them), and (2) the speech-act theory whose three basic conditions for a successful linguistic action—conventions, accepted procedures, and guarantees of sincerity—are transformed into the repertoires, the strategies, and the realization (*Act* 56, 60, 69) for the study of the literary text.

Adopting the phenomenological theory of art, Iser distinguishes the two poles of the literary work: the artistic pole referring to the text with its numerous constituents, and the aesthetic pole, to the reader's concretization or realization of the text via his endeavor to bridge the gaps and establish consistency out of textual constituents. Neither of them can be identified with the literary work *per se*, for the latter comes into existence through the interaction of the two. To put it another way, the reader in his reading of the text is offered a host of linguistic signs among which his imagination dictates his selection and connection and from which he tries to gratify his inherent desire for consistency by constructing the meaning of the text by and for himself.

Iser discovers a common feature in his study of phenomenology, speech-act theory, social psychology, psychoanalysis, and communication theory—indeterminacy (here synonymous with contingency, unpredictability, or undecidability) as an essential ingredient of all human interactions, including of course linguistic and literary communication. As one of the "different forms of an indeterminate, constitutive blank which underlies all processes of interaction" (*Act* 167), contingency is featured by "a productive ambivalence: it arises out of interaction and, at the same time, stimulates interaction" (164). And the asymmetry between text and reader compels the reader to fill in the blanks and fulfill "a basic need for interpretation" (165). Therefore, so far as literary communication is concerned, indeterminacy is an indispensable impetus to the reader's involvement in and response to the text, for it effects a counterbalancing effort on the part of the reader.

Iser makes use of the Polish phenomenologist Roman Ingarden's concept of "schematized views" to describe the nature and function of indeterminacy. Presenting a literary text "in a representative manner" ("Indeterminacy" 10), schematized

views reveal and determine various aspects of the literary object. Although determinate, they do not appear in a continuum, and the gaps between them "give the reader a chance to build his own bridges, relating the different aspects of the object which have thus far been revealed to him" (11). So the reader is invited by the text to determine (in the sense of "making determinate") the meaning of the text through "remov[ing] them [the gaps] by a free play of meaning-projection and thus by himself repair[ing] the unformulated connections between the particular views" (12). The filling-in of the indeterminacies of a text thus requires the reader's participation, inference, and determination. A literary text, anticipating the reader's involvement and fulfillment, is not complete in itself. And the variety of the reader's imagination and disposition leads to "a free play of interpretation" (11) and the openness or inconclusiveness of the text.

However, the reader is not free to say whatever he likes about a text, for the text, albeit with its different types of gaps (mainly, the indeterminacy between reality and text, that within text itself, and the asymmetry between text and reader), offers some guidance for the reader's ideational process. The following statement expresses succinctly the relation between determinacy and indeterminacy:

Communication in literature is a process set in motion and regulated not by a given code but by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment. What is concealed spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is revealed; the explicit in its turn is transformed when the implicit has been brought to light. (*Act* 168-69)

In other words, the reader is given a number of fixed materials, but not enough of them to make a definite and unanimously agreed picture of the text or, to use Iser's astronomical analogy, "[t]he 'stars' in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable" ("Reading" 282). In short, the reader's imagination is activated by indeterminacy and guided by determinacy.

Indeterminacy, a drawback in Ingarden's classical concept of art, is a great merit and a unique factor of the literary text according to Iser. Being unfixed, it offers a space awaiting the reader's completion. To grasp the text, the reader has to consciously or unconsciously link the disconnected schematized views by a projection of his disposition and preconception. Since each man's disposition and preconception are unique, there are as many concretizations of a literary text as there are readers. This accounts for the richness and diversity of interpretations (as each meaning-projection is basically an interpretive act) and the inexhaustibility of the



text. Moreover, the same reader's reading and re-reading of the same text are different, for his re-reading is unavoidably tintured with and conditioned by, however slightly and unconsciously, his previous reading and his life experience gained between the two readings. Hence the unrepeatability of the reading experience. It is the reader's active involvement in the reading process—his imagination being activated, his feeling being aroused, his personality being projected—the brings forth the virtual dimension of the text and endows reality upon the text. This endowment of reality conduces to the lifelikeness of the text.

As the reader's subjectivity is propelled by the gaps between the schematized views, indeterminacy results in intersubjectivity. The reading or interpretation comes from the interaction between the subjectivity of the reader and that of the author, namely, a product of intersubjectivity. The reading process, therefore, is "virtually hermeneutic" ("Reading" 285), for no reader is innocent: the reader brings into the text his pre-understanding and both reader and text are somewhat altered by each other. So Iser is different from those traditional critics to whom literature is a representation of external reality and the task of the critic is "the referential reduction of fictional texts to a single 'hidden' meaning" (*Act* 10). On the other hand, he also draws a line between himself and other reader-response critics who take for granted or pride themselves on the total subjectivity or unlimited, anarchistic pluralism of reading. For the proclaimed absolute objectivity and the self-complacent total subjectivity, Iser substitutes intersubjectivity. Since "a literary text contains intersubjectively verifiable instructions for meaning production," Iser urges that "an intersubjective frame of reference" be established (*Act* 25).

Arguing against the ontological emphasis on what literature *means* (semantics), Iser's functionalist viewpoint focuses on what literature *does*. He resorts to the speech-act theory for the study of the pragmatic nature of language, because the reading of a text, "involv[ing] an understanding of the text, or of what the text seeks to convey, by establishing a relationship between text and reader," is also "a linguistic action" (*Act* 54-55).

As aforementioned, Iser changes Austin's three essential conditions for a successful performative utterance into the repertoire, the strategies, and the realization (*Act* 69) in his discussion of the text. The repertoire consists of historical, social, and cultural norms as well as literary allusions, namely, "the 'extratextual' reality" (*Act* 69).<sup>4</sup> Referring to the extratextual reality, the elements of the repertoire are marked by determinacy. The selection of these elements out of their original con-

text, itself being an act of judgment, does not altogether cut off their old connections. And transplanting them into a literary text places them in a new context in which new connections necessarily arise. Furthermore, the various ways of combining the repertoire elements—namely, textual strategies—also create new connections and significances. Therefore, in comparison with the elements of the repertoire, the text is much more indeterminate, and it is this indeterminacy, we are told once again, that “endows the text with its dynamic, aesthetic value . . .” (*Act 70*)

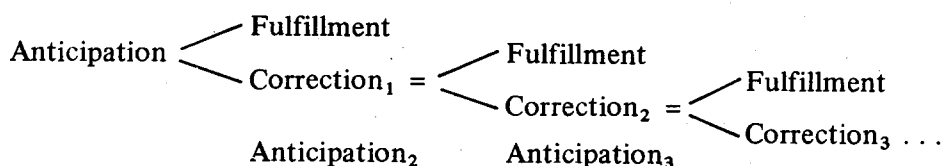
While historical and social norms as well as literary allusions constitute the repertoire, the literary text “almost invariably tends to take as its dominant ‘meaning’ those possibilities that have been neutralized or negated by that [thought] system” (*Act 72*). So the relation between the literary text and reality is not reflection or deviation, but reaction, and that between fiction and reality is not opposite, as commonly conceived, but complementary. Reacting to and complementing external reality, the text, however, does not make fully explicit its selection and combination of the repertoire elements. As social and historical norms cannot make clear their selections, it remains for literary allusions to supply “a means of generalizing the repertoire” (*Act 80*). The examples of Fielding and Spenser cited by Iser strongly suggest the genre as a generalizing principle. So the literary repertoire has a two-fold function: “it reshapes familiar schemata to form a background for the process of communication, and it provides a general framework within which the message or meaning of the text can be organized” (*Act 81*).

If the repertoire deals with the selection, the strategies then have to do with the combination: the former “sets the work in a referential context within which its system of equivalences must be actualized,” and the latter serve “to organize this actualization” (*Act 86*). Combining materials selected from social and historical systems as well as literary traditions, the strategies comprise “a whole system of perspectives,” the most prominent of which being “[the perspective] of the narrator, that of the characters, that of the plot, and that marked out for the reader” (*Act 96*). They do not exist in isolation, but interact with one another in a very complicated manner, for “while each perspective offers a particular view of the intended object, it also opens up a view on the *other* perspectives. . . . [A]ll these are interwoven in the text and offer a constantly shifting constellation of views” (*Act 96*).

What follows is a summary of the function of the strategies in Iser’s conceptual scheme: (1) to combine the materials selected from historical, social norms and literary traditions, (2) to organize a whole spectrum of perspectives that activate the

reader to assemble for himself the meaning of the text in the way "dictated by the continual switching of perspectives during the time-flow of his reading" (*Act* 97), and (3) to set up a structure for the reader to establish his system of equivalences as "a transcendental vantage point from which he can see through all the positions that have been formulated" (*Act* 99).

As the repertoire and strategies of the text unfold gradually and cannot be grasped as a whole at any single reading moment, time plays an essential role in the reader's interaction with the text. Iser depicts the reading process in terms of Ingarden's concept of intentional sentence correlatives and Edmund Husserl's idea of man's inner consciousness of time. Briefly stated, reading is a happening in time. Reading being a temporal process and presented through the verbal medium, the act of reading is then the reader's sequential processing of the text. Characterized by indeterminacy, the literary text demands "the reader's imagination, which gives shape to the interaction of correlatives foreshadowed in structure by the sequence of the sentences" ("Reading" 277). Involved in the time-flow of reading, the reader inevitably generates an expectation of the following text. The expectation can be neither wholly fulfilled nor completely frustrated, otherwise either boredom or exhaustion will occur. Instead, the reading process is a continual modification of the expectation, and the modified expectation itself, in turn, will become a renewed expectation of what is to follow. The triadic structure is thus drawn by Chang Han-liang:



The reading process, therefore, is marked by the reader's continual oscillation between entanglement and detachment, involvement and observation, illusion-forming and illusion-breaking. And this particular way of production and reaction to one's own production, in Iser's opinion, is the way "the reader experiences the text as a living event" (*Act* 129). No longer the passive consumer of the text, the reader becomes the co-author in his "active and creative" ("Reading" 275) reading of the text.

Since the wandering viewpoint splits the text into different perspectives and

switches among them, the reader has to synthesize the text for himself. This formation of syntheses is named after Husserl's "passive syntheses." To Iser, the essential factor of the passive synthesis is the image. Standing between an empirical object and a pure thought, the image "transcends the sensory, but is not yet fully conceptualized" (*Act* 136). To understand a literary text with its indeterminacy and non-referentiality, the reader strives to vivify it by bringing into play his "imagistic vision of the imagination" (*Act* 137). Here Iser draws his important distinction between perception and ideation. To perceive presupposes the existence of an empirical object, while to ideate assumes its non-existence. Synthetizing various textual signs, the image is itself the product of consistency-building and is marked by "the interconnectedness of these multiple references [invoked by textual signs]" (*Act* 140). To facilitate the discussion, I propose to distinguish the image from the consistency in that the image, though also a synthesis of various textual aspects, stands for a smaller unit, such as a character or a scene, whereas the consistency refers to the state of being consistent, the reader's effort to make something consistent, and the overall meaning constructed through the reader's act of meaning-assembly.

As the wandering viewpoint shifts from one textual perspective to another, there is a close relation among the text, temporality, the wandering viewpoint, and the meaning:

Meaning itself, then, has a temporal character, the peculiarity of which is revealed by the fact that the articulation of the text into past, present, and future by the wandering viewpoint does not result in fading memories and arbitrary expectations, but in an uninterrupted synthesis of all the time phases. . . . The time axis articulates the meaning as a synthesis of its various phases and shows that meaning arises out of a demand for fulfillment which the text itself produces. (*Act* 148-49)

Therefore, it may be assumed that the wandering viewpoint serves as a transition from the text to the reader or, to be more precise, it connects the intersubjective structure of the text with the reader's subjective concretization of the text. As the wandering viewpoint goes over the text, the reader synthesizes and makes sense of the materials being processed (namely, the textual schemata in the form of the repertoire and the strategies). At the end of his reading, the reader usually forms a general view of the text. More specifically, after his various reading moments characterized by selection and combination (consistency-building, gestalt-producing, illusion-forming) as well as modification and reciprocal spotlighting (consistency-destroying, gestalt-eliminating, illusion-breaking), the reader establishes a different

and transcendental construct: different because it differentiates itself from any particular product at any particular reading moment; transcendental because it is a synthetical construct of all textual perspectives and thus above and beyond any one of them. To a literary critic, the consistent gestalt which follows is his interpretation of the text.

Iser further discusses the two basic structures of indeterminacy: blanks as the structure of indeterminacy within the text, and negations, as that between text and reader. A blank or hiatus is an empty space in the text which not only breaks the connections between textual schemata and impedes a smooth processing of the text, but also, by so doing, serves as a propellant for the reader's ideational process and activates the reader's creative imagination to provide the missing links. A blank is removed when the schemata and perspectives are hooked up by the reader. Confronted with the structured blanks, the reader is obliged to perform the following tasks: (1) "to 'internalize' the positions given in the text," (2) "to make them act upon and so transform each other," and (3) to bring about the aesthetic object (*Act* 203).

Just as Iser divides the textual elements into two categories—the repertoire having to do with selection and content, and the strategies, with combination and structure—here he shifts his attention to the paradigmatic axis of reading (namely, negation) which has much to do with the repertoire. He distinguishes the controlling ways of the process of communication exerted by blanks and negations: blanks syntagmatically "induce the reader to perform basic operations *within* the text" and negations paradigmatically guide the reader "to adopt a position *in relation* to the text" (*Act* 169). Blanks and negations, instead of standing in opposition (syntagmatic vs. paradigmatic), are intimately interwoven. Blanks between the textual perspectives and strategies syntagmatically activate the reader's imagination to fill in and remove the blanks. In this syntagmatic linkage of the text's structural segments, the reader finds that his familiar, determinate repertoire and norms have been paradigmatically negated. Furthermore, the negation, "stimulat[ing] the reader into building up its implicit but unformulated cause as an imaginary object," produces the blanks which "prestructure the contours of this object and also the reader's attitude toward it . . ." (*Act* 213)

The negation is of two kinds: the primary negation relates to the repertoire of the norms and the external world and is therefore thematic; the secondary negation, "not marked in the text, but . . . aris[ing] from the interaction between textual sig-

nals and the gestalten produced by the reader" (*Act* 220-21), has to do with the reader's disposition and reorientation and is, therefore, functional and intersubjective. In other words, the primary negation produces blanks in the repertoire of norms, and the secondary negation, blanks in the reader's position.

Consequently, in addition to being the empty spaces between perspective segments in the strict sense, blanks in the broadest sense include the empty spaces between the reader and his external world and those between the reader's disposition and discovery. All three form the incongruity which activates and is settled by the reader's creative meaning-projection. In short, blanks and negations produce asymmetry which, through the reader's filling-in the hollow form of the text, leads to the convergence of text and reader and makes the reader experience an unfamiliar reality.

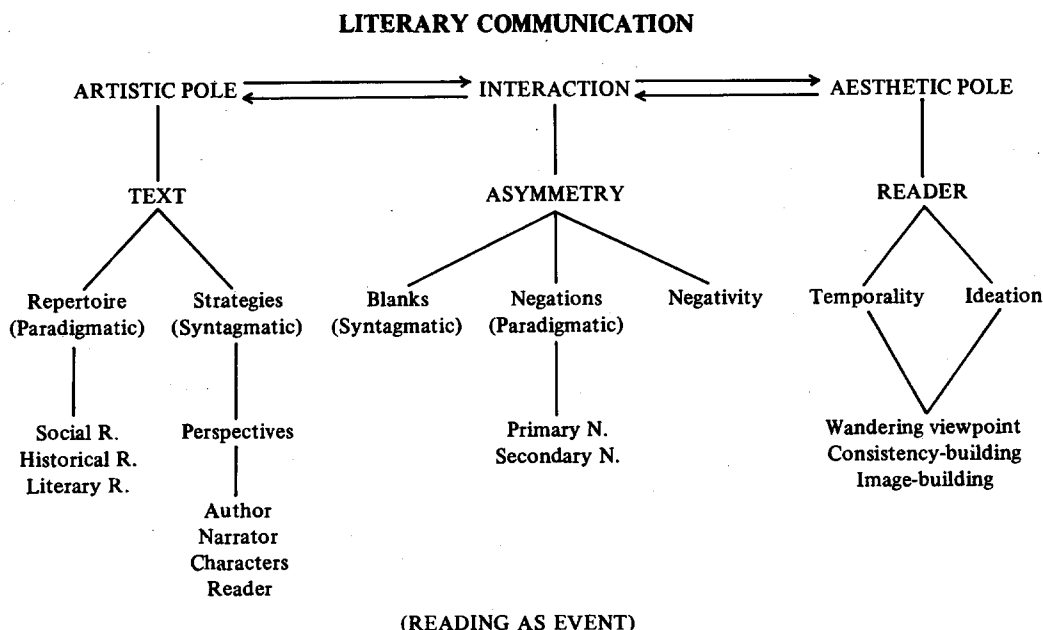
To Iser, negativity is the "nonformulation of the not-yet-formulated" (*Act* 229-30). As "the basic force in literary communication" (*Act* 226), negativity demands a process of determining and is therefore marked by contingency, subjectivity, and fecundity. For the present study, let it suffice to say that negativity is productive in that it asserts the existence of other possibilities for text and reader without explicitly defining them.

Iser sums up the function of these three concepts in "Indeterminacy of the Text: A Critical Reply":

The concepts of blank, negation and negativity serve to differentiate the notion of indeterminacy and to designate specific modalities for the description of the processes of interaction between text and reader. Blanks condition and structure the reader's participation in the reading process. Negation constrains the reader to adopt a particular kind of differentiated attitude towards the text. And negativity, finally, in functioning as the virtual cause of "coherent deformation" is a necessary condition for the constitution of meaning in the reader's consciousness. Negativity allows meaning to be understood as the possible transformation of presented events. (36)

To summarize Iser's theory of aesthetic response, we may say that he follows the phenomenological concept of art and divides literary communication into the text, the reader, and their interaction. In his discussion of each of the constituents, he draws supporting data, often with some modification, from various disciplines. We suspect there are discrepancies among the presuppositions of these various disciplines. Following Iser's example, however, we consider that these data have been taken out of their familiar contexts and placed in a new context in which many previously hidden meanings emerge. And his theory contributes greatly to our un-

derstanding of the nature of aesthetic response. A breakdown of Iser's theory is shown below:



### III

This paper proposes to apply Iser's theory of aesthetic response to the discussion of classical Chinese narrative criticism. The first doubt that comes to mind is that Iser's theory is based, to a large extent, on his concept of the implied reader, which "incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader's actualization of this potential through the reading process. It refers to the active nature of this process—which will vary historically from one age to another—and not to a typology of possible readers" (*Implied* xii). It is, therefore, a transcendental construct not to be pinned down to any particular, definite reader, while the Chinese critics, with their "documented reactions" (*Act* 27), belong to the realm of real readers. This doubt is ungrounded, for when a reader confronts a text, he is neither a hypothetical nor a transcendental construct, but a real reader situated in a specific spatial-temporal context and inevitably entangled with his particular disposition. His meaning-assembly of the text is only one of the possible interpretations of the text, whereas the concept of the implied reader theoretically allows for

a potentially immeasurable number of interpretations. Iser himself is a case at hand. As an advocate of the concept of the implied reader, he considers it "a construct . . . in no way to be identified with any real reader . . . a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him" (*Act* 34). But in his practical criticism, as clearly evidenced by *The Implied Reader*, Iser, as a reader confronted with a literary text, has to bridge the gaps, build consistency, and make things determinate. Through an interaction between the intersubjective structure of the text and the subjective projection of his disposition, Iser offers and inevitably sticks to *one* out of a sea of possible interpretations. In other words, as an actual reader, his interpretation is only one possibility among a great number of interpretations allowed for by the concept of the implied reader. As Iser observes:

The fact that the reader's role can be fulfilled in different ways, according to historical or individual circumstances, is an indication that the structure of the text *allows* for different ways of fulfillment. Clearly, then, the process of fulfillment is always a selective one, and any one actualization can be judged against the background of the others potentially present in the textual structure of the reader's role. Each actualization therefore represents a selective realization of the implied reader, whose own structure provides a frame of reference within which individual responses to a text can be communicated to others. This is a vital function of the whole concept of the implied reader: it provides a link between all the historical and individual actualizations of the text and makes them accessible to analysis. (*Act* 37-38)

This is precisely one of Iser's major contributions: he offers not only one interpretation of a literary text, but also a heightened awareness of the existence of other interpretations which are always possible, often equally valid, and sometimes more valid.

Iser's theory in this regard can be more clearly seen when set against the relative exclusiveness of Culler's concept of literary competence and Fish's concept of the informed reader, to say nothing of Hirsch's insistence on the authorial intention (Culler, *Structuralist* 113-30; Fish, *Is* 48; Hirsch, *Validity* and *Aims*). Both Culler and Fish presuppose that the reading of a text by a literarily competent reader or an informed reader must be competent and informed, implying that other readings and interpretations are incompetent and uninformed.<sup>5</sup> It may be somewhat boldly assumed that the competent or informed reader highlights but one aspect of the concept of the implied reader. Therefore, it is justifiable to apply Iser's concept to the study of some Chinese critics who with their commentaries establish consistency and strive to perpetuate their interpretation. Yet, mistaking their interpretation for



the ultimate meaning, they either are blind to the possibility of other interpretations or attack other interpretations.

Iser's observation is highly illuminating with respect to temporality and the reading process. In their confrontation with the text, these Chinese critics identify the various elements of the repertoire and strategies and their wandering viewpoint shifts from one textual perspective to another. Through consistency-building and reciprocal influences, they transfer the meaning of the text to their consciousness. Then, as critics equipped with their competence and hindsight, they point out the techniques employed by the author to facilitate such a transference of meaning. As Iser puts it, "[The literary critic] is able to use his hindsight to analyze the techniques which bring about the 'first' meaning. The result of such an approach is that the reader will also become far more aware of the book as a work of art" (*Act* 149).

What is remarkable is the arrangement of these commentaries. Following the traditional Chinese textbooks, most of the commentaries appear in smaller characters in the text. So the readers supposedly process the text and its commentaries sequentially. Although it can be argued that the readers, especially those of the Chinese popular literature, might skip the commentaries and read the narrative only (as proved by the later disappearance of the commentary-carrying editions and the popularity of the pure-text editions), there is no denying that the commentary-carrying editions aim at the future readers' simultaneous processing of the text and commentaries and do offer this opportunity. Through this typographical arrangement, the critics influence the reader *before* and/or *along*, not *after*, as most criticism does, the act of reading the narrative *per se*. So the future readers, while processing the text, are simultaneously instructed by the critics' commentaries to determine the meaning of the text.<sup>1</sup> Their reading process, therefore, combines the interaction between reader and text with that between reader and commentaries (which embody the insight and hindsight of other sophisticated readers). That is to say, their ideational process of the text occurs at the same time with their processing of the determinate (to the critics and their readings) and determining (to the future readers and their readings) commentaries of the critics.

The critics' interpretations, however definite and even definitive they appear, by no means exclude the possibility of other interpretations. Herein lies the significance of Iser's concepts of intersubjectivity and negativity. So far as intersubjectivity is concerned, Iser observes:

[T]he intersubjective structure of meaning assembly can have many forms of significance, according to the social and cultural code or the individual norms which underlie the formation of this significance. Now subjective dispositions play a vital role in each realization of this intersubjective structure, but *every subjective realization remains accessible to intersubjectivity precisely because it shares this same intersubjective structure as its basis . . .* (Act 151, emphasis added).

In a sense, negativity is also a blank—the vast blank surrounding any particular interpretation of the text. It is an enabling element, acknowledging and welcoming the existence of other interpretations. And the following binary oppositions—the implied reader vs. the real reader, indeterminacy vs. determinacy, negativity vs. formulation—make possible our description of and metacriticism upon these critics who with their literary competence, favorable temporal proximity, and authoritative tone establish themselves as self-ordained ideal readers.

There are other reasons for my adoption of Iser's theory. Some of the most plausible ones are from the perspectives of the genre, the hypothesis, the performance, and the applicability. Generically speaking, although Iser claims that his theory can be conveniently applied to the study of other simpler genres—thinking that the novel might be the most complicated and difficult genre to be dealt with ("Interview" 65)—yet it cannot be denied that his theory (evidenced by his analysis of the textual strategies mainly in terms of the four perspectives of the author, the narrator, the characters, and the reader) focuses on the narrative and that his practical criticism is almost entirely devoted to prose fiction, especially the English fiction from the seventeenth century down to the twentieth century (also see Scholes 14). And the Chinese equivalent of the Western fiction most readily at hand is the *hsiao-shuo*, despite some appraisal and reappraisal of this equation (Plaks "Full-length" and "Towards"; Hui-chuan Chang).

Furthermore, Iser's affirmation of the existence of the text and of the author's perspective in the textual schemata (and therefore the existence of the author) is compatible with the classical Chinese literary concept. Unlike Roland Barthes's pronouncement of "the death of the author" (142-48), David Bleich's disproportionate emphasis on the reader at the expense of the author, Fish's recent concept of the interpretive communities (*Is* 14-16, 303-71), and therefore their common inattention to the interaction between text and reader, Iser's triadic structure of the aesthetic response is more congenial to the working hypotheses and critical performances of the traditional Chinese critics. No one can deny the energy and achievements of Barthes's, Bleich's, and Fish's concepts. The fact, however, is that Iser's

theoretical framework and working hypotheses (the affirmation of the existence of the text, the stress on temporality, historical and social norms, and literary allusions, as well as the emphasis on the communicatory process and the role of the reader) are more homogeneous to Chinese literary conventions.

In addition to the homogeneity of Iser's theory and its relative soundness and comprehensiveness, his practical criticism is attentive to the texture, the structure, the techniques, and the theme. His careful treatment of both form and content and the subtle arrangement therein resembles the close reading and the emphasis on organicity of New Criticism and accounts for Iser's popularity in the Anglo-American academic world (Holub 100-01), notwithstanding the basic conflict of the autonomy of New Criticism vs. the interaction of Iser's theory. The similar phenomenon is also seen in the study of traditional Chinese criticism. In their study of Chin Sheng-t'an's commentary, both John Wang and Ch'en Wan-i are attracted by Chin's close analysis of the text and associate it with New Criticism (Wang 51-52; Ch'en 86-90). This deceptive affinity to New Criticism explains why we take pains to discuss at length Iser's theory, for any study ignoring the basic theoretical incompatibility will be misleading—and often the more insightful it appears, the more misleading it is.

One of the greatest reasons underlying my endeavor concerns the frequent misgivings about applying Western theory to the study of Chinese literature. Various scholars on various occasions emphasize the importance of this operation and believe that it will cast new light on the hitherto neglected part of Chinese literature and provide stimuli and hopefully bring responses from the traditional scholars embarking on the traditional study of Chinese literature. But many scholars also express their doubt about this grafting or even inflexible superimposition, doubting that the hybrid product will gain acknowledgement and affirmation from either of its parents. Therefore, Heh-hsiang Yuan cautions the Chinese-Western comparatists to avoid the "twice removed" situation which may occur between the Western and the Chinese, theory and praxis. Citing traditional Chinese critics Chin Sheng-t'an, Mao Tsung-kang, and Chang Chu-p'o for instance, Yuan thinks that "[t]raditional views have their value when properly treated" (585). This observation can be strengthened by a metaphorical transference of Iser's concept of interaction and transplantation. The application of the theory of aesthetic response fundamentally based on Western prose fiction to the study of traditional Chinese narrative and its unique form of criticism severs its connections with the old context and, with the establishment of

the new connections, the yet hidden significance might surface. This interaction will alter each of the two components, for it illuminates some of the significant viewpoints buried in the original context and throws light on the previously obscure area of the new context.

Aiming at an investigation into the interaction and mutual spotlighting between Western theory and Chinese literary tradition, this paper advocates the applicability of Iser's theory of aesthetic response to Chinese narrative and to the doubly complicated situation of the commentary-carrying editions as well as its eligibility as a point of departure for metacriticism on the traditional Chinese narrative criticism exemplified by these *hsiao-shuo p'ing-tien* critics.

### Notes

- 1 Ying-shih Yu is probably the first Chinese scholar who applies Thomas Kuhn's concept of paradigm to the study of the *Hung-lou-meng* (1-39).
- 2 Two anthologies of reader-oriented criticism bear witness to this perplexing situation. Jane P. Tompkins's anthology traces the development from its beginnings in New Criticism, through structuralism, stylistics, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. In a similar manner, Susan R. Suleiman distinguishes "six varieties of (or approaches to) audience-oriented criticism: rhetorical; semiotic and structuralist; phenomenological; subjective and psychoanalytic; sociological and historical; and hermeneutic" (6-7). Steven Mailloux draws a chart to demonstrate some of the leading reader-response critics and their main ideas (22). And Iser's criticism of Norman Holland, Holland's questioning of Iser, and the vehement exchange between Stanley Fish and Iser are some examples most readily at hand (see Iser, *Act* 31-32 and 38-50; *Diacritics* 10:2, 58-61; Fish, "Why"; and Iser, "Talk").
- 3 "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," first published in *New Literary History* 3 (1972): 279-99, is the only theoretical essay in Iser's *The Implied Reader*, 274-94.
- 4 Here Iser contrasts extratextuality with intratextuality, the relation between the elements of a single text. According to the common usage, however, literary allusions belong to the realm of intertextuality, the relation between one text and other texts. For a discussion of intertextuality, see Kristeva, 15, 36-38, 51-55, 82-86; Riffaterre, 115-50; Culler, *Structuralist* 139-40 and *Pursuit* 86-90, 101-18.
- 5 For a recent criticism of the concept of "literary competence," see Joseph A. Dane, 53-72.

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