

# Inheritance and Recreation: The Transformation of Literary Paradigms in *Fan Hua*'s Shanghai Urban Narrative

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## Abstract:

The developmental history of literature revolves around a continuous process of retrospection and breakthroughs regarding literary context through “inheritance” and “recreation.” Since the May Fourth Movement, new literature has flowed and transformed between established literary paradigms. Shanghai’s urban narrative, as one of the most vibrant literary contexts, exemplifies a creative stance that is both traditional and pioneering, which is reflected in its century-long literary evolution. This paper aims to select the representative Shanghai urban narrative text of the twenty-first century, *Fan Hua*, to explore the transformation of literary “paradigm” in contemporary literature from two dimensions: inheritance and innovation. The representative contemporary text of Shanghai’s urban narrative, *Fan Hua*, surrounds two key elements, investigating its relationship with ancient texts and new-style novels, showcasing the perseverance and evolution of the literary soul and spirit over time after enduring the vicissitudes of classical paradigms.

**Keywords:** Paradigms; inheritance; recreation; storytelling fictions; Shanghai School Literature; *Fan Hua*.

## 1. Introduction

In the traditional context of Chinese classical literature, the creation of literary paradigms represented a process deeply rooted in inheritance. The purpose of literary writing tended to establish or adhere to established standards, using creative discourse to consolidate these standards. Therefore, the Chinese classical literary theoretical framework resisted the advent of “new literature” aspiring to break away from the established norm.

Fung Yu-lan, in his work *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, divided the era of classical Chinese literature into two periods: the *Zixue era* (the era of compiling classics) and the *Jingxue era* (the era of studying classics) [1]. He used the advocacy of Dong Zhongshu as the dividing point between these two eras, and the formation of Confucianist unified ideology marked the decline of the vibrant and diverse intellectual landscape that characterized the period since the Warring States period, persisting until the emergence of the new literature after *the May Fourth Movement*. However, the *Jingxue era* shows powerlessness in replicating the lively intellectual discourse of the *Zixue era*. The *Zixue era* is a phase of compiling classics and expressing innovative ideas. In contrast, after the various schools of thought, the *Jingxue era* is characterized by a long period of “adhering to classics and formulating arguments” [2], while the primary responsibility of Confu-

cian scholars was to defend and refine established literary paradigms.

Since *the May Fourth Movement*, modern literary narrative has gradually shifted away from paradigms. More precisely, there has been an ongoing and profound transformation of paradigms within literary inheritance. As Chen Sihe stated, “...the most central part appeared in the form of pioneers, suddenly breaking away from tradition [3].” New literary contexts emerge, like railway tracks, aiming to challenge existing literary forms or paradigms with a pioneering and unconventional attitude. Creative subjects continuously construct new literary forms in contemporary literary contexts.

In the history of modern and contemporary literature, Shanghai’s urban narrative has emerged as a distinct and literature-specific style. Throughout its development, Shanghai has appeared as an inclusive city facing the world, serving as a frontier outpost overlooking global trends. Any change or new trend—no matter how subtle—cannot escape this port city adapting and embracing innovation. Therefore, the literary context of Shanghai urban narration, as one of the most distinctive regional literary contexts, exhibits a relatively more radical inclination to accept and reflect multicultural influences on literature than inland cities like Beijing and Xi’an. It presents a more open and modern attitude and represents its profound transformation of literary paradigms. This

paper aims to select the twenty-first century's most representative Shanghai urban writing text, *Fan Hua* [4], and explores the transformation of literary "paradigm" in contemporary literature from two dimensions: inheritance and innovation.

## 2. Inheritance: *Fan Hua* and Traditional Storytelling Fictions

The recreation of literary paradigms cannot be transcendental or unprecedented; it must be based on the inheritance and continuity of existing literature. The position occupied by literature pioneers is always within the confines of existing literature. Only in this way can they freely transform and renovate literary conventions. In the context of Shanghai urban writing, *Fan Hua* provides a classic example of inheriting traditional storytelling fiction.

In his postscript to *Fan Hua*, Jin Yucheng remarks: "The style of storytelling is like an old rut which today's wheel slips into it, looking still smooth and novel [4]." The "old rut" refers to the narrative mode that originated from the storytelling stalls of the Song and Yuan dynasties. This narrative mode is not fixed; it has evolved and been transformed by generations of folk narrators over hundreds of years, resulting in the most attractive form of verbal expression.

First and foremost, the core of storytelling fiction lies in its ability to tell stories. The most important task throughout the presentation of storytelling fiction is to effectively and simply convey stories to the sensory perception of readers and audience. Therefore, storytelling fiction does not prioritize sophisticated narration or elaborate descriptions. Instead, it relies on straightforward storytelling to captivate its audience. Conversely, most urban citizens were unwilling to accept that a large amount of lyricism and preaching would occupy their precious leisure time extracted from busy and monotonous lives. Delicate descriptions and numerous plotlines can immerse readers, alleviating the melancholy of reality.

In her *Talks on Reading*, Eileen Chang once evaluated storytelling fiction: "Old novels are dispersedly unfolded in a flat development with many people showing up. Readers can hardly see the words and actions outward with inner descriptions, in sharp contrast to the depth of Western novels [5]." In this context, she does not criticize storytelling fiction for its lack of depth. Instead, she believes its half-formed thoughts may appear more elusive and lacking in depth. Just as James Joyce's stroke of genius in *Ulysses* remains unparalleled, if literary writing cannot delve into the intricacies of thought, storytelling with comprehensive plots and characters may be more commendable than arti-

ficial expressions of disjointed thoughts and emotions.

Furthermore, storytelling fictions often construct grand backdrops, which enable authors to weave complex interpersonal relationships within this context and engage these readers through captivating plotlines. Unlike the hero-centric model of classical legendary texts, storytelling fictions focus on a series of ordinary characters in "conversational" scenes, shifting the novel towards a commoner-centric direction. Stories of heroes or literary genius with fair ladies are no longer the main themes of such novels.

In *Fan Hua*, Jin Yucheng presents Shanghai urban life in Shanghainese dialect, interspersed with scenes of street life and various gatherings, forsaking the "obscure psychological aspects" and faithfully inheriting the narrative techniques of traditional Chinese storytelling, such as "the pursuit of complexity over omission" [4]. In the final chapter, Husheng and Abao help the French youth Rui Fu'an and his girlfriend Anna complete their envisioned script by the Suzhou River—a storyline featuring a French textile factory owner falling in love with an ordinary Shanghai girl working in the factory in the 1930s. The narrative is visually appealing from Rui Fu'an's perspective but is extremely unrealistic, such as a French textile factory that did not exist by the Suzhou River and a flat boat that could not sail upstream along the Suzhou River [4]. This narrative pattern mirrors typical legendary tales, except for replacing young heroes and handsome literary poets with foreign capitalists, noble ladies, and common girls with girls working in a modern factory.

Jin Yucheng crafts the plot in the epilogue of *Fan Hua*, perhaps intending to satirize clichéd legends that, despite their ingenious construction, ultimately fall into banality from the perspective of a modern storyteller in the 21st century. In the book's postscript, he states: "My original intention was to be a storyteller of extremely low position" [4]. This original intention of the "storyteller" is a tribute to storytelling novels and a gesture of respect towards their audience. In the past, Suzhou's storytellers would revise their stories overnight in response to even a single yawn from the audience. When this spirit of „storytellers“ fades away gradually, as a portrayal of Shanghai in the 21st century, *Fan Hua* does not adopt the arrogance often associated with modern cities. Instead, with a sincere retrospective attitude, it presents readers with the "shining charm" discovered in tradition, adopting a stance of "being humble instead of being lofty" [4].

## 3. Recreation: Retro Pursuit and Innovation

The birth of *Fan Hua* represents the recreation of both the models of legendary novels and storytelling fiction. From

a historical perspective, it is inappropriate to make a blanket statement about the extent of these transformations. Regarding the reshaping of legendary novels, Jin Yucheng adopts a retro approach, while in challenging storytelling models, the focus revolves around the pursuit of innovation.

### 3.1 Retro Approach: Breaking the Conventional Narrative Model of Legendary Novels

Jin Yucheng aims to use the storied approach to dispel the gradually distorted and unrealistic allegorical narration in legend novels, thus conveying new forms and new life through a more dynamic language by employing old stories. For example, the script of the Suzhou River by Rui Fu'an in *Fan Hua* was written in the 1990s to look back at 1930s life in Shanghai. However, for the sake of spectacle scenes, many plot setups are seriously disconnected from the reality of Shanghai [4]. Throughout the book, *Fan Hua* subtly confronts this legendary writing model. The protagonists, Abao, Husheng, and Xiaomao, who almost ran through the entire narrative, do not exhibit themselves as protagonists like legendary novels. Instead, they integrated into the city's fabric, serving as silent observers. They neither appear abrupt and dazzling nor deliberately downplayed characters, allowing countless individuals' emotions to intertwine in each "silent moment."

Similarly, other characters in the novel also embody this silent storyteller's temperament, even if their scenes are limited to just a short segment. For example, in the 25th chapter, Mrs. Li reminisces about the scene of their first meeting with her beloved: "Mr. Li said, at that time, I encountered a scholarly-looking literati, wearing a long gown, an English cashmere scarf, a suit with cuffed trousers, and a pair of nearly new English leather shoes. He smiled at me, and I smiled back. He said that he had been searching everywhere, looking around, and finally, by chance, we met. I smiled in response. He said, 'Coincidence. I've always thought that if I were to compose a piece of music with my beloved playing the bamboo flute under the gentle breeze of autumn, beneath the bright moon, the two of us exchanging poetry and literature, flipping through pages, sipping a cup of daughter's red wine, with a plate of mooncakes on the table, and moonlight outside the window. How joyful I would be if such a day were to come [4]." The descriptive language unfolds gracefully, with concise, short sentences flowing seamlessly, one after another. The irresistible charm of the storyteller is vividly portrayed.

Jin Yucheng, in the afterword of *Fan Hua*, mentions his desire not to allow "escaping the narrative style of the storyteller" to become a completely positive literary appraisal [4]. In other words, he hopes to reshape the previous

model established by legendary novels by using a more traditional storytelling mode. As the significance of imitation gradually diverges from contemporary writing, the term "paradigms" sometimes leans more towards "shackles" than "classics"; thus, only by creating breakthroughs can authors reshape the meaning of eternal architecture [4].

### 3.2 New Pursuit: Reshaping the Mode of Storytelling Fiction

In the 21st century, novels are no longer mere entertainment for a square table and a dozen listeners. Therefore, compared to traditional storytelling methods, *Fan Hua* must seek self-innovation based on the foundation of storytelling itself. The storytelling model of *Fan Hua* is constructed entirely within the context of "conversational" scenes, where characters, environments, and plots are all intertwined within the dialogue, striving to eliminate any subjective emotions of the author that readers might perceive. This represents the first innovation point, departing from traditional storytelling, where subjective narration by the "storyteller" was crucial for attraction and vibrancy, followed by a multidimensional construction method according to tradition. In contrast, *Fan Hua* boldly fills nearly 370,000 words throughout the book, with Shanghai dialect permeating every part.

Moreover, *Fan Hua* explores an "intermediate layer between the current form of the novel and old texts" [4]. This "intermediate layer" is Jin Yucheng's new attempt to create a fusion dish, combining Shanghai-style cuisine and Western cuisine using *Fan Hua* as an example. In other words, it seeks a perfect harmony between traditional storytelling fiction and modern novels. This pursuit of harmony is not singular but permeates every aspect, including structure, style, narrative mode, expression of ideas, and emotional tension, which is in line with *Fan Hua*'s aim to find a solution that can both inherit the traditional strengths of storytelling novels and resonate with the "frequency of contemporary written language" found in both Eastern and Western modern novels [4].

For instance, *Fan Hua* consists of thirty-one chapters, excluding the introduction and afterword. Odd-numbered chapters are marked with traditional Chinese characters, depicting events set in the 1960s, while even-numbered chapters are marked with simplified Chinese characters, depicting events set in the 1990s. The world of Shanghai, separated by thirty years, intertwines like two dark threads woven into the ever-changing urban streets, where the storyteller talks incessantly while remaining silent inside, leaving the task of filling the emotional blanks to the readers. It is akin to a stage play where nothing is fully formed, with verbose language being the only lifeline that readers can tightly grasp. Following the colloquial expres-

sions of the storyteller, the narrative gradually invades the senses, ultimately penetrating deep into the heart of the language, like comprehension of a freehand painting amid skilled language [6].

However, to a great extent, the pioneering nature of *Fan Hua* lies in its breakthrough of the negative stereotypes associated with the storytelling model within the contemporary Chinese literary landscape. This does not imply that the traditional storytelling model itself is trailblazing. As a representative of ancient popular literature, the content of traditional storytelling fiction largely remains under the domination of feudal ethics. There is a vast gap between the themes of love and marriage in Song and Yuan dynasty storytelling and the themes of fleeting time and romantic affairs in *Fan Hua* in terms of time and significance. Consequently, the most brilliant pioneering aspect of *Fan Hua* lies in the core dissolution of themes and the rupture of meanings. After erasing the epic symbols of grand narrative and the legendary hues of individualism, *Fan Hua* picks up the remaining fragments one by one, reconstructing a series of chaotic yet vivid portraits of this era. In spite of their respective independence in time and space, they are closely connected in some sense, collectively forming a literary portrayal of a period or a public sphere. Placing individuals into time and space is vague and ambiguous, while it is also hard to ignore their unique colors after extracting characters from time and space.

After setting the spatial focus on Shanghai, the pioneering status of *Fan Hua* becomes even more pronounced through a longitudinal comparison of urban description from different periods along the timeline. *Midnight*, a monumental epic in modern literature about Shanghai, establishes a classic mode of urban writing [7]. By portraying characters and urban culture comprehensively and meticulously, it highlights the critical themes of class and humanity in Chinese realism literature. Regardless of the extent to which *Midnight* may draw influence from naturalism, carry traces of the Shanghai School Literature, or portray romantic and tragic experiences of Wu Sunfu's modernist adventures, it remains a grand narrative text in the leftist literary world. The conflict between traditional feudalism and colonial modernity is vividly portrayed in the first chapter, where Wu Sunfu's father died suddenly after entering Shanghai from the traditional countryside. Later, Wu Sunfu's pursuit of revitalizing national capitalism ended in failure and suicide. Mao Dun consistently emphasizes the class critique of the text through vivid character images, distinct background settings, clear purposes, and the depiction of large-scale social phenomena, making it a highly purposeful social analysis epic [7].

However, when it comes to Eileen Chang, "the dazzling significance in the epic world has already dimmed" [8].

Her "legendary" novels truly implement the modernity of Shanghai literature into the lives of men and women in the Shanghai-Hong Kong world. In Wu Fuhui's definition, "modernity" is an inevitable characteristic occupying the most significant position. From Zhang Ziping and Ye Lingfeng to the second generation of the "New Sensationists" such as Liu Na'ou, Mu Shiyong, and Shi Zhecun, the modernist color of Shanghai School Literature has become quite pronounced [9]. Eileen Chang's urban legends belong to the third generation of the Shanghai School of Literature. Compared to *Midnight*, the modernity and populism of Eileen Chang's legendary texts are even more prominent. The novel focuses no longer on social analysis and class critique, as seen in the epics, but on the entanglement of flesh and spirit in the mundane world. The artistic energy of the Shanghai narrative has truly found unprecedented vigor in individuals [8].

Yet the influence of Eileen Chang on Shanghai School literature is immeasurable, leading to numerous imitators, but very few truly comprehend Eileen Chang's writing spirit. These writers merely scratch the surface of Eileen Chang's legendary novels, producing what Huang Ping described as "cheongsam novels" superficially with pretentious and self-pitying gestures [8]. Even Jin Yucheng has admitted in interviews that he did not deliberately inherit Eileen Chang's literary tradition when composing *Fan Hua* [10]. Instead, he lightly sketches the changing faces of life and the myriad of circumstances in a new mode that transcends personal legends. This is an act of respectful reverence, as it is impossible to replicate Eileen Chang, and blindly imitating her literary works would drain contemporary novels of vitality. Thus, amidst the intermediate layer of "inheritance" and "recreation," an urban landscape tinged with postmodern colors quietly emerges.

Through its dense and impenetrable narration, *Fan Hua* seeks to discover the historical and cultural changes underlying the narrative control of Shanghai and projects them onto the narrative subjects of the city's joys and sorrows. Whether observers contemplate individuals as writing subjects or Shanghai as the narrative world, everything appears hazy and indistinct. Whether it is the central characters throughout the novel, such as Abao and Husheng, or those who only appear in a short period of their lives, like Shuhua and Li Li, after experiencing the changes in life, they all become empty and vague, lonely individuals, with their footsteps hesitant and directionless [4]. The significance of portraying a cast of characters in *Fan Hua* becomes apparent, which allows millions of people floating between bustling excitement and desolate gloom to "embrace the world illuminated by language" [4]. The pioneering nature of the spiritual theme is the key dis-



tion of *Fan Hua* from the hollow works that followed Eileen Chang, who overly demanded writing splendor and desire. Under Jin Yucheng's modest yet profound narration, it gains an additional weight of historical magnanimity.

#### 4. Conclusion

The paper provides a detailed analysis of Jin Yucheng's *Fan Hua* from the contrasting perspectives of "inheritance" and "recreation." It primarily discusses how *Fan Hua* reflects on traditional storytelling fiction while navigating the "intermediate layer" between traditional storytelling and new novels, thus breaking free to create more pioneering works in line with contemporary literature spirit. Building upon this analysis, the author further points out that both "retro" and "innovation" can serve as means to subvert literary norms rather than merely representing conservatism or breakthrough. *Fan Hua* employs various techniques, such as dual narrative threads and montage, to break free from the constraints of traditional storytelling novels. Conversely, it also nostalgically adopts the narrative mode of storytelling novels to pay homage to storytelling fiction and history. These divergent yet converging approaches lead to the dissolution of existing literary paradigms and the transformation and reconstruction of new ones.

Consequently, whether adhering to established literary norms or aspiring to forge new paths, the development of literature always requires a pause for the birth of new literary styles or literary spirits. To break free from the developmental cycle of "from infancy to maturity, then from maturity to decline," literature must constantly transform the so-called "literary paradigms" during its development, infusing new and unconstrained literary spirits into the literary organism.

When interpreting the historical evolution of Shanghai's urban literature, narrative changes in works such as the transformation from *Flowers of Shanghai* to *Love in a Fallen City* and *Fan Hua* should not be viewed solely as a linear literary progression. Traditional storytelling fiction and legends hold significance, just as modern Shanghai

literature has its literary construction purposes. The goal is not to determine "who is more advanced" through the inheritance and innovation of paradigms. *Fan Hua* cherishes a literary spirit that dares to dispel the charm of existing paradigms. While the traditional storytelling format fell out of favor in history, *Fan Hua* takes the opposite approach, adopting a "preference for complexity over brevity" as its narrative principle. While meaningful writing becomes the essence of novels, *Fan Hua* suggests that "God doesn't speak, and everything is determined by me" [4]. It represents the supreme value commandment held within the diverse world populace, thereby being further diluted and even completely dissolved. Even flawed individuals can embody eternal concepts like "love, freedom, and beauty" [4].

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