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CONCEALED STROKES

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Fu-bi as Aesthetic Principle

W. Michelle Wang

In this chapter, I examine the aesthetics of *fu-bi* [伏笔]—a Chinese literary device approximately equivalent to the narrative technique of *foreshadowing*. While most readers and critics tend to be familiar with the functions of foreshadowing (“whereby some situation or event is hinted at in advance” [Prince 33]), exactly how such shadows or hints are constituted, or the qualities they share in common, seems to have received less systematic critical attention. Part of the reason for this likely relates to the myriad diversity of ways in which such hints can be embedded within the “narrative progression” (Phelan 3),¹ such that various aspects of foreshadowing have likely been further examined under an array of alternate terms (e.g., plot devices that relate to prefiguring, surprise, or narrative suspense).² In discussing how *fu-bi* functions as a form of “advance mention”—where the importance of a specific narrative element may not be readily recognized when it first appears (Prince 4)³—I elucidate under-examined aspects of foreshadowing through my discussion of this highly valued aesthetic quality in Chinese narrative arts. In particular, I suggest that the notion of “suggestive concealment” (Wang, “Disarrayed” 279)—which is central to a range of Chinese arts, including fiction, painting, poetry, and film—underpins our appreciation of foreshadowing. Using a comparative analysis of the Chinese web novel and its televisual adaptation *Love like the Galaxy* (2018–2019; 2022) as my case study, I explain how this Chinese aesthetic strategy can enrich our understandings of foreshadowing and narrative progression, significantly contributing to scholarship in the areas of television aesthetics and narrative theory.

Suggestive Concealment

Chinese literati culture has long been shaped by wide-ranging critical interests across the arts: “from poetry, painting, drama, and the prose essay to historiography and such ‘minor’ pursuits as gardening, antiques, and interior designing” (Plaks 122). Andrew Plaks observes that fiction critics (e.g., from the Ming to Qing periods)⁴ often “worked in more than one field of aesthetics”; their critical exegeses thus demonstrated “a high degree of cross-fertilization between the separate art forms” (121–122). Metaphors of architectural construction and tailoring, for example, are frequently used to elucidate narrative compositional arrangements, where the critic “draw[s] the reader’s attention to those points at which the various sections of a text are joined together” (86, 88–89, 93). Narrative suspense can thus be created “by deliberately withholding information or anticipated actions at one point [. . .] in order to leave the ‘filling in’ (*pu* 補 [i.e., to mend or to

patch clothing]) of the expected material for a later point in the text,” allowing “considerable room for provisional gap filling on the part of the reader” (91).

In a review of central concepts/terminology used in Chinese fiction criticism, Plaks observes that “critics most typically offer praise for such literary qualities as suggestiveness [. . .] and indirection” (80–81). Part of the reason for this likely relates to the language’s Daoist philosophical underpinnings, as expressed in the philosopher Zhuangzi’s view of language as a “functional” and “imperfect instrument,” necessarily “inadequate for its purposes” of expressing Daoism’s central tenet of *dao* (Li 578–579).⁵ For Zhuangzi, “[t]he only way to deal with the inadequacy of language is to fully explore [its] suggestive power [. . .]—that is, capture meanings by insinuation rather than by plain explication”; the scholar Li Dian thus argues that Zhuangzi’s writing is “directly responsible for the emergence of what has generally been referred to as the ‘aesthetics of indirection’” in Chinese poetics (579).

Characteristics such as indirection, concealment, suggestiveness, and covertness are highly prized in many aspects of Chinese arts and literature.⁶ When addressing such qualities in Chinese fiction, Plaks notes that critics “borrowed from the field of painting a variety of technical terms, most of which can be rendered as ‘adumbration’” (111)—which resonates distinctly with the notion of indicative shadows in the term *foreshadowing*. For example, Chinese landscape painters’ diverse methods of applying ink wash (in combination with brushstrokes and other techniques) “in order to evoke the presence of images not directly depicted is transferred to the field of fiction criticism”—in particular, to convey impressions “evoke[d] through indirect suggestion rather than direct narration” (111–112).⁷

Eugene Wang traces one such line of cross-fertilization between these different Chinese arts to the Northern Song period, which he locates as “the initial moment” of attempting “to cross the divide between poetry and painting,” when the renowned writer Ouyang Xiu called “for a poetic turn in painting” (“Disarrayed” 282, 280).⁸ Wang observes that during this time, “to make a painting look poetic is to resort to suggestive concealment, *cang* 藏: to use vaguely inked forms as an atmospheric smokescreen to hide whatever is to be hidden” (281). Wang draws on the well-known twelfth century account of an imperial examination to elucidate this subgenre of paintings, where the poetic line “the disarrayed hills conceal an old monastery” was used as a compositional prompt (279). While most of the resulting paintings lacked the quality of concealment—“an aesthetic derived directly from poetry”—the top prize went to a painting depicting “a monastic flag-pole peeping over rustic hilltops”; “the most poetic way” to paint the desolated monastery was thus “not to paint it at all,” that is, to depict only obliquely through concealment (Varsano 25; Wang, “Disarrayed” 279).

I contend that this notion of suggestive concealment is especially pertinent to *fu-bi*/foreshadowing: the idea that shadows, hints, or oblique allusions of what is to come as “hiding” in plain sight, “the significance of which becomes clear only (well) after it is first mentioned” (Prince 4). An exploration of the multiple meanings encapsulated by the two Chinese words *fu* [伏] and *bi* [笔] offers a clearer sense of the qualities encompassed therein. *Bi* refers to a writing implement (such as a pen or brush for writing or painting) and/or to the brushstrokes or touches thereby produced; while *fu* is most often used in reference to the position of bending over or lying prostrate, especially for purposes of concealment, hiding, or lying low. Andrew Plaks notes that the verb *fu* serves a “structural function” in the term *fu-bi*—in reference to the preparatory work of “deliberately planting narrative threads to be taken up later,” allowing these varied strands to be “worked into the continuing patterns of recurrence that make up the texture of the work” (96–97). In addition to *fu-bi*, the word *fu* is also part of other terms that similarly suggest the notion of latency for the purpose of some deferred action—that is, initially assuming

a diminished position in order to later assert presence, akin to how we regard an earlier narrative detail as later gaining salience in foreshadowing.¹⁰ For example, *fu* is used with reference to an ambush or the act of waylaying (*fu-ji* [伏击] and *mai-fu* [埋伏]); to refer to that which lies latent or to go undercover (*qian-fu* [潜伏]); to describe a state of dormancy, such as torpor or hibernation, in order to conserve energy (*zhe-fu* [蛰伏]); or to undulating, wave-like motions or patterns of rising and falling (*qi-fu* [起伏])¹¹—all of which enrich the conception of *fu-bi* as an aesthetic strategy.

Taking Plaks’s discussion of *fu-bi*—which he defines as an “aesthetic principle of forward projection” (97)—as a starting point of my inquiry, I examine three key aspects of this Chinese aesthetic principle, which I contend can enrich current understandings of foreshadowing: the first relating to hiddenness and the oblique (or the partly visible); the second to gap-filling; and the third to patterning generated in the narrative’s undulating ebbs and flows. All three dimensions figure prominently at the levels of both story and discourse¹² in *Love like the Galaxy*, making it a productive case study for examining the dynamics of *fu-bi*. Furthermore, the success of the web novel’s recent televisual adaptation¹³ yields an instructive comparative analysis, since I argue that significant adaptational shifts between the two long-form narratives render such concealed brushstrokes more visibly.

Loosely situated against the backdrop of the Eastern Han dynasty’s founding by Emperor Guangwu during the first century CE, the one-million-word Chinese web novel *Xing Han Can Lan, Xing Shen Zhi Zai* [《星汉灿烂，幸甚至哉》] was published by novelist Zheng Yi (better known by her pen-name, *Guan Xin Ze Luan* [关心则乱]) in 179 installments from 2018 to 2019, and later adapted into a 56-episode drama serial *Love like the Galaxy* (《星汉灿烂·月升沧海》) in 2022.¹⁴ The story’s (fictitious) events center on the emperor’s foster son, Ling Buyi, and the woman who eventually becomes Ling’s fiancée, Cheng Shaoshang. More than three quarters of the way through the story, an (unexpected) anagnorisis accompanied by peripeteia occurs. A crucial aspect of the narrative progression is thus dependent on how this anagnorisis is managed, especially in order to avoid audiences’ judgments of the revelation as an “aesthetically deficient plot twist” (i.e., what Marie-Laure Ryan terms “a cheap plot trick” that relies on narrative cliché, where a plot event is “poorly prepared,” “looks forced,” or “whose function for the plot as a whole is too obvious” [56–57]). Plot in long-form narratives that are centered on such disclosures of previously hidden information offer fertile ground for examining *fu-bi* and foreshadowing—particularly for knowing audiences who experience *Love like the Galaxy* as adaptation, and who thus anticipate the impending revelation.¹⁵

Given the length and plot complexities of *Love like the Galaxy*, multiple lines of *fu-bi* in both web novel and drama series avail themselves to the type of inquiry I am proposing in this chapter. To keep the analysis focused, I restrict my remarks primarily to the central anagnorisis of Ling Buyi’s hidden identity in the subsequent sections on hiddenness, gap-filling, and patterning, even as I briefly acknowledge here the generativity of following alternate lines of *fu-bi*. For instance, implicit narrative threads addressing the theme of political succession and the ramifications of policies put in place to limit the effects of nepotism and cronyism are briefly alluded to in a tangential remark by Shaoshang’s mother (“为破世家袭勋之风” [ep. 18]), during her daughter’s initial engagement to Grand Tutor Lou’s younger nephew. The consequences of this fleeting foreshadow—and its far-reaching implications for the heir apparent to the throne—are only rendered visible much later in the narrative (eps. 45–46, 51). I focus primarily on the central anagnorisis involving Ling Buyi not only because of its pivotal importance to the narrative as a whole, but also because an analysis of the adaptational shifts relating to this revelation allows me to fully explicate these three dimensions of *fu-bi*.

Hiding in Plain Sight: Concealment and Visibility

My comparative analysis of how *fu-bi* functions in *Love like the Galaxy* is centered in two key adaptational shifts that the drama series makes in its treatment of the narrative's global instability (Phelan 16):¹⁶ the massacre of Gu City 15 years prior to the narrative present—a tragedy that precipitates the central anagnorisis in episode 48 / chapter 134. The fall of Gu City assumes the status of a founding narrative in *Love like the Galaxy*, because the event is central to the establishment of the new current dynasty by Emperor Wen—a fictional persona based on founding Emperor Guangwu of Eastern Han. Wen's sworn brother General Huo Chong and his family, along with the soldiers and civilians of Gu City, are massacred during Wen's struggle for ascendancy to the throne; among the city's few survivors are Chong's sister Huo Junhua, her husband Ling Yi, and their only son Ling Buyi (who also goes by the name Zisheng).¹⁷ Overwhelmed with guilt, Emperor Wen adopts Chong's nephew Zisheng and lavishes upon him the honors due to the Huo family.

What readers learn only three quarters of the way through the novel is that the truth surrounding the circumstances of the massacre is quite different to the widely circulated narrative: that it was in fact Ling Yi's treachery that led to the city's downfall, when he secretly opened the gates to enemy troops and murdered Chong—his brother-in-law and the city's commander-in-chief; unbeknownst to all, the sole witness was Chong's six-year-old son, Huo Wushang, who was thought to have died during the massacre, with his head staked to the city walls alongside his father's. The crucial anagnorisis centers on Shaoshang's inference of her fiancé's identity shortly before he exacts revenge on the Lings: the man known to all as Ling Buyi is not Huo Chong's nephew but his son (a fact known only to Zisheng and Huo Junhua—who is his aunt and not his mother).¹⁸ While the novel foreshadows this hidden truth in various ways—for example, in the polite reserve Zisheng maintains toward his apparent father Ling Yi (ch. 69, 112, 122); Shaoshang's observation, contrary to popular opinion, that Zisheng resembles Huo Junhua rather than Ling Yi (ch. 86, 123); Zisheng's search for survivors from his uncle's troops more than a decade after the tragedy (ch. 105, 116)—because these indicative hints are plausibly explained in other ways, the unexpected revelation comes as something of a shock.

There are two important adaptational shifts that the drama series makes in service of *fu-bi*: the first is thematically incorporating the investigative process of this hidden truth about Gu City at the level of story. The novel does not make readers privy to this process partly because the narrative is dominantly focalized through Shaoshang, a non-participant in these past events; however, in the drama adaptation, because even Zisheng himself does not have full knowledge of these events, the audience follows him on this process of uncovering hidden connections between fragments of information about his past. (What remains unchanged is that Zisheng himself is aware of his own identity, and the fact is similarly withheld from the audience and other characters for most of the narrative in both novel and drama.) The second important shift is cues or hints built into the drama adaptation that signal an unarticulated or hidden truth, as yet unknown to most characters and the audience.

Part of the reason why the anagnorisis may feel somewhat abrupt¹⁹ to readers of the novel relates to the almost complete backgrounding of the Gu City massacre: prior to Zisheng's act of exacting vengeance, there are no definitive indications to suggest that the well-known version of the city's fall is in any way contentious (and hence a source of global instability). However, in the drama adaptation, there are continuous foreshadows that, to borrow from Paula Varsano, "tacitly point to the existence of some dissimulating surface under which the recognized object has been contained—a surface that, for all its effectiveness in its role of concealment, is even more effective at signaling that it conceals something" (154). While Zisheng's identity—in turn tied to

the truth surrounding Gu City—effectively remains hidden until at least episode 46, the sense of some unresolved mystery about the past is signaled relatively early in the adaptation. For example, when Zisheng interrogates Lord Yong about his role in causing Gu City's downfall (ep. 19); or when Huo Junhua wonders aloud to Zisheng, about whether Emperor “Wen will stand up for us, mother and son, if I were to reveal the whole truth [若我说出一切真相，文家阿兄会为咱们娘俩出头吗],” lamenting that the evil-doer (“作恶者” / “那坏人”) is still alive—though what this truth entails or who the evil-doer is remains unspecified, and only Junhua and Zisheng are privy to it (ep. 25).

In *Love like the Galaxy*, this “dissimulating surface” is created by varied modes of hiding—which Varsano describes as a “play between the illuminated and the obscured, the known and the unknowable” (154, 4). Hiddenness can be fashioned by “[w]ithholding, distraction, the manipulation and creation of blind spots” (27)—all of which are in evidence throughout the novel and drama series. For example, the truth of Zisheng's identity is withheld for an extended duration from both characters and the audience—15 years at the level of story and more than 40 episodes/130 chapters at the level of discourse; Ling Yi's remarriage also distracts us from the true nature of the acrimonious relationship between him and his wife/son (i.e., characters and the audience alike are led to believe that Junhua and Zisheng's hostility toward Ling Yi stems from his abandonment of the family)—a smokescreen that veils the fact that their anger is driven by his earlier acts of treachery and murder in Gu City. In particular, the strategy of what I call “hiding in plain sight” is especially generative in *Love like the Galaxy*.

In both novel and drama series, an important *fu-bi* in preparing readers for the eventual anagnorisis lies in the configuration of Zisheng and Junhua's relationship—the only two individuals privy to the truth about his identity and the city's downfall. When the audience is first introduced to the middle-aged Junhua, it is apparent that she is only partially lucid (ep. 16/ch. 86); her guilt over the role that her husband played in the Huo family's massacre results in Junhua frequently mentally reverting to her unmarried 16-year-old self. She sometimes takes Zisheng to be her deceased brother Chong (ep. 31); at other times, she mistakes him for her estranged husband Ling Yi (ep. 33); periodically, she confuses him with the real Ling Buyi—Zisheng's cousin and Junhua's actual son—who died in Gu City (eps. 20, 46); or, on occasion, dismissively treats him as a distant nephew seeking refuge from the calamities of war (eps. 16, 33). Flitting between such disorientation and at times lucid recognition, Junhua's “madness”²⁰ becomes one such dissimulating surface upon which the *fu-bi* is shaped.

At the level of story, Junhua hides the sole surviving male descendant of the Huos right under Ling Yi's nose, passing Zisheng off as their son, thus forestalling her estranged husband from doing Zisheng harm.²¹ At the level of discourse, Junhua's frequent and abrupt oscillations between states of disorientation and lucidity become the narrative's occasion for similarly hiding the truth in plain sight. When audiences first encounter her, a disoriented Junhua identifies Zisheng as “that distant nephew” who is “freeloading” off her brother Chong [“我堂兄家那个吃白食的侄子”], to which Zisheng responds with a respectful bow and gently replies: “Your nephew respectfully greets the young lady. [...] The young lady shows compassion to the poor and cherishes the young; your sons and nephews are filled with gratitude [侄子，给女公子见安了。(...)女公子怜贫惜幼，子侄们感恩戴德]” (ep. 16).²² The true nature of their relationship is thus hidden in plain sight from the very beginning, foreshadowing the anagnorisis more than 30 episodes later, a *fu-bi* embedded within the dissimulating surface of his aunt's disorientation.

There is also another hidden level of implied meaning to Zisheng's words: despite Junhua's apparent dismissiveness of freeloading distant nephews, in her own moment of great personal grief when her only son was (mistakenly) staked to the city walls 15 years earlier, she rescued her

orphaned nephew—the very boy for whom this cruel act had been intended—and protected him by masking this sorrow, turning her grief entirely inward. It is Zisheng’s implicit recognition of this selflessness—one that cannot be openly acknowledged given the secret of his identity—that makes his gentle response especially wrenching for knowing audiences; such nuances are movingly rendered in actor Leo Wu’s [吴磊] portrayal of Zisheng, conveying excruciating pathos in all the hidden registers of the unsaid.

Sometimes taking Zisheng for Huo Chong, at other times mistaking him for Ling Yi, Junhua’s “madness” propels a dynamic indeterminacy that simultaneously reveals even as it conceals. Her misidentification of Zisheng as her deceased brother Chong serves the purposes of *fu-bi*, because Zisheng is indeed her brother’s son—yet this revelation is concealed not only by Junhua’s disorientation but also by the strong physical resemblance between the siblings (such that Zisheng’s resemblance to Chong is attributed to Junhua).²³ Correspondingly, when Junhua mistakes Zisheng for Ling Yi—with whom he does not share genetic ties—the misidentification serves as an effective mask that deflects attention from Zisheng’s true identity, offering him a form of protection by (inadvertently) fostering the notion that he resembles “his father” Ling Yi (ep. 49). It is crucial to note that Junhua’s “madness” is such an effective dissimulating surface because her society unquestioningly accepts the apparent reason for her derangement as Ling Yi’s remarriage having driven her mad with jealousy—that is, her behavior is judged as fitting the gender stereotype (as several characters derisively remark) of the “mad, abandoned wife [被休弃的疯妇]” (ep. 29). *Fu-bi* thus reveals even as it conceals, drawing attention to the ways in which such dissimulating surfaces are textually and culturally constructed, where such concealment is enabled by playing into these gender stereotypes.

Gap-Filling: Reverberations in the Emptied Space

Like hiddenness, another significant aspect of *fu-bi* lies in the reverberations created by the gaps generated between story and discourse. Wolfgang Iser influentially used the term *gaps* to describe “programmatically omissions of [narrative] details,” contending that it is through such “omissions that a story will gain its dynamism” (Leitch 54; Iser 284). Iser explains that when we “bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself”—we arrive at “a configurative meaning” that accounts for both the artistic and aesthetic poles of the literary work, wherein “the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader” (285, 289, 279).

While varying types of gaps²⁴ are inherent to most (if not all) narratives, for my purpose of examining *fu-bi*, I focus on temporary gaps where omissions are initially rendered salient and later filled in the narrative discourse. Such gaps generate an interplay where, to borrow from Virginia Woolf, the audience’s “attention is half upon the present moment, half upon the future” (qtd. in Iser 280), creating momentum for the forward projection central to *fu-bi*/foreshadowing. Alternately, these gaps may be provisionally filled in ways that purposefully distract or temporarily misdirect the audience: for instance, *Love like the Galaxy* often appears to fill such gaps in one way, only to subsequently subvert those initial accounts. Such purposeful misdirections facilitate plot twists, where the audience’s initial expectations are overturned—even as the workings of *fu-bi* bolster such rhetorical maneuvers, preparing us for the eventual peripeteia. Another crucial purpose served by such temporary gap-filling is its momentary easing of the narrative’s burgeoning tensions, allowing a more expansive pattern of foreshadows to become visible in the narrative’s ebbs and flows, before ultimately converging on the anagnorisis in episode 48.

One instance of temporary gap-filling occurs shortly before the anagnorisis, when a definitive hint of Zisheng's hidden identity is literally rendered visible to Shaoshang in the form of urticaria that develops from his allergy to apricot. While Ling Buyi loves apricot, Shaoshang learns that his cousin Huo Wushang (i.e., Junhua's nephew/Chong's son) is allergic (ep. 46).²⁵ When Zisheng's confidants, the Liangqiu brothers, speculate why Shaoshang leaves abruptly before Zisheng regains consciousness—an unexplained gap that both characters and the audience are invited to fill—unlike the brothers who interpret her behavior as one of frustrated concern at his failing to take proper care of himself, the audience (rightly) infers her suspicions of his identity due to the allergy, though it turns out that this inference is only partially accurate. After the anagnorisis, it is revealed that there are two omissions to the scene at hand (i.e., events that have been deferred by three episodes, coming to light only in ep. 49). The first pertains to Shaoshang's discovery of the missing half of her jade pendant in Zisheng's possession (which is linked to a separate *fu-bi* from ep. 22 relating to the imperial succession); the second has to do with Shaoshang seeing a unique birthmark on the small of Zisheng's back, though she does not initially register its significance until its relevance to proving Zisheng's identity is foregrounded in episode 49.

Beyond their implications for *fu-bi* at the level of story, these temporary gaps are significant because they overtly render the author's sleight of hand visible,²⁶ drawing the audience's attention to these previous omissions at the level of discourse, and hence to the authorial design. Foreshadowing similarly directs attention "to the design of the author, whose structure is entirely responsible" for the effects thus generated (Morson 50). Gary Saul Morson remarks that we are most "palpably reminded of the work's status as artful product" when we sense "the author's essential surplus of knowledge"—a term he borrows from Mikhail Bakhtin to refer to information that is known to the author but unavailable to a character—noting that readers participate to different degrees in this essential surplus; "[p]erhaps the most dramatic sign of the essential surplus is *foreshadowing*" (44–45). Morson suggests that when readers share in the author's access to characters' lives in this manner (e.g., in the "secret knowledge that an unwitting [character] faces disaster"), "we may experience a heady but morally troubling feeling because we occupy a position analogous to a god's"; or, to paraphrase James Phelan, foreshadowing can create an uncomfortable "ethics of the telling" given the uneven distribution of knowledge (Morson 44; Phelan 11).²⁷

By embedding such gaps in the narrative discourse—where we are cued to the omitted scenes between Zisheng and Shaoshang retrospectively, and hence to knowledge only author and character(s) have been privy to—the drama adaptation recalibrates the balance of knowledge between characters and the audience, shaping a more symmetrical distribution of information that partly ameliorates the hierarchical effects of uneven knowledge created by foreshadowing. This authorial sleight of hand simultaneously foregrounds the endless potential for suggestive concealment even in a visual medium like television, which conventionally tends to rely dominantly on "showing" and chronological progression. A closer examination of the complexities and inherent dynamism of such processes—by attending to aesthetic principles such as *fu-bi*, for example—can thus contribute productively to further scholarly work in television aesthetics.

Another salient gap in the narrative discourse emerges in Huangfu Yi's account of his failed engagement to Sang Shunhua, which serves as a suggestive parallel to Shaoshang's romantic relationships with Zisheng, Lou Yao, and Yuan Shen (ep. 15). At the level of story, their varying responses to this embedded narrative elucidate the characters' views toward love, marriage, and duty, even as Huangfu's story serves an important *fu-bi*—a forward projection of impending instabilities in their interrelationships. For instance, Lou's attention is drawn to Huangfu's dilemma of being caught between his commitment to Sang on the one hand, and his promise of

duty to care for a dying father's daughter on the other—Huangfu's choice of the latter leads Sang to end the engagement and foreshadows how Lou's own betrothal to Shaoshang will end shortly, as the result of a similar obligation to another dying father.²⁸ Meanwhile, like Huangfu's treatment of Sang, Yuan's chances with Shaoshang are foiled by his pride, where his means of expressing affection for Shaoshang similarly manifest as a haughty indifference. Zisheng and Shaoshang's views on marriage, commitment, and love are revealed to be the most aligned, foreshadowing their eventual union. Like Huangfu, Zisheng is exiled for seven years following the anagnorisis; but, unlike Huangfu, Zisheng never gives Shaoshang cause to doubt his affections for her (eps. 51–52).

At the level of discourse, the drama adaptation renders this account in an intriguing manner, in which Huangfu's voiceover narration is juxtaposed with an imaginary scene of marriage: where Yuan is positioned in the role of Huangfu (dressed as a groom, yet watching in despair from the sidelines as the woman he loves marries someone else), Shaoshang in the role of the bride Sang, and an unidentifiable man in the role of the groom whom Shaoshang/Sang marries. This creative decision by the drama production team differs from the novel, which focuses only on the narrative present of Huangfu's narration and does not feature this imagined scene. The drama adaptation thus chooses to explicitly cast the Huangfu–Sang narrative as *fu-bi*, employing the art of indirection by creating a temporary gap in the groom's identity and situating the scene as external (rather than internal) focalization. That the groom remains unidentifiable takes on renewed retrospective significance in light of Shaoshang's dawning sense of how little she understands Zisheng, when she discerns all that he has been keeping from her—including his identity (ep. 47). This temporary gap of the groom's identity is filled only after the anagnorisis toward the end of the series, as part of Zisheng's dreams (ep. 50). To paraphrase Iser, the adaptation's approach to the scene thus invites the audience to shape our own configurative meanings by filling the gaps with connections we forge between the Huangfu–Sang narrative and the present romantic tensions among Shaoshang, Zisheng, Yuan, and Lou.

Patterning

In what follows, I examine the role that patterning plays in *fu-bi*, building on preceding sections, since such patterns are evident in all these instances: for example, between Huangfu and Lou's congruent choices of what they perceive to be a gentleman's duty; between Huangfu and Zisheng's circumstances of being exiled, in separation from the beloved; and between Huangfu and Yuan's eventual rejection by the women they love. *Fu-bi* invites the audience “to admire the manner in which material introduced earlier in a text reflects forward or projects (*chao* 照) to later occurrences of the same textual configuration,” where “the aesthetic function of forward reflection can be seen to operate even before the full pattern of recurrence has been formed sufficiently to bear out the expectations of the reader” (Plaks 96). Such patterning is in evidence everywhere in the (Chinese) narrative arts. In *Love like the Galaxy*, in order to avenge his father and other victims of the massacre, Zisheng must paradoxically commit “patricide”: he kills Ling Yi—whose son's identity Zisheng has appropriated for the past 15 years—after Ling Yi destroys what appears to be the final link in the chain of evidence that Zisheng has been gathering about the truth of Gu City (eps. 48–50).

Such patterning is further intensified by the tragic cosmic determinacy implied within this circuit of names.²⁹ Prior to the anagnorisis, Shaoshang and the audience learn that the name Buyi had originally been intended for Huo Chong's son and was later given to his sister Junhua's son (ep. 46; the novel explicitly notes that Junhua insisted on seizing the name for her own son

[ch. 123]). Following the anagnorisis, instead of reverting to his previous name Huo Wushang, Zisheng decides to keep the name Buyi—in memory of his aunt and cousin, whose death inadvertently allowed him to narrowly escape the massacre (ep. 51/ch. 138). The name Huo Buyi, which should originally have been his from birth, thus makes a circuitous path and returns to Zisheng more than two decades later.

This patterning is also manifest in the adaptational shifts between novel and drama, where one crucial structural change that the screenwriters adopt is using Zisheng's backstory to thread a series of initially unrelated/loosely related events in the novel together: from Zisheng's investigation of stolen armaments (eps. 4, 6–7, 10, 16–17, 19–20) to the truth surrounding delayed reinforcement troops to Gu City (eps. 20, 23, 25, 28, 40–41, 43, 46–47), the adaptation shapes a sophisticated, patterned web of relations that ultimately converges on the eventual anagnorisis in episode 48. Such patterns form an important part of audiences' aesthetic appreciations of the series: for instance, in a vlog series published on Youtube during the initial airing of *Love like the Galaxy*, the vlogger (who has clearly read the novel closely) points to the brilliant patterning in such adaptational shifts. Among numerous examples raised, the vlog explicates how the drama adaptation reshapes Zisheng and Shaoshang's initial meeting by creating a situational parallel where both will bring their respective uncles to justice: Shaoshang turns in her granduncle Dong to Zisheng, who is investigating Dong's role in armament theft (ep. 1), while Zisheng himself will bring his uncle to justice in the debt of blood that Ling Yi owes the Huo family and the inhabitants and soldiers of Gu City (ep. 48).³⁰

In Vera Tobin's analysis of how surprise functions as a plot device, she notes the audience's cognitive tendencies "to anticipate, to fill in, and to engage in speculative pattern completion as we encounter fragmentary information in language and in the world" (90). Brian Boyd has also discussed the significance of patterning in art (especially the narrative arts) in his book *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*, where he describes "art as cognitive play with information-rich pattern" that can "extend and refine key cognitive competences" (190). Boyd proposes that the "high concentrations of pattern that art delivers repeatedly engage and activate individual brains and over time alter their wiring to modify key human perceptual, cognitive, and expressive systems" (85–86). Given our appetite for such patterned information "from which we can make rich inferences" (14), I argue that the audience's interest in *fu-bi* rests on such potential to yield rich aesthetic pleasure in its adumbrations of as-yet-unseen patterns of recurrence.³¹ As with Iser's discussion of a literary work's artistic and aesthetic poles, narrative patterning in *fu-bi* is likewise driven by both the author's artful design on the one hand and by audiences' aesthetic appreciation on the other. To paraphrase Richard Walsh, pattern (or "intelligible form") does not simply inhere in the text, but exists "in the subject-object relation. Pattern, to be pattern at all, needs both to be *there*, and to be discerned; it is an interpretative perspective upon phenomena. Pattern, in other words, occupies the indefinite realm of the implicit; that which is available to cognition, yet only realized by it" (298). Walsh thus observes that "[a]n answering gesture of interpretation, then, should attend to the complex network of connotations beyond the linear narrative form of the story" (300). I argue that the aesthetic principle of *fu-bi* is one such network for capturing these author–text–audience dynamics, where the perception of such pervasive patterns drives our sense of the narrative's dynamic cohesion.

Conclusion

I hope to have amply demonstrated how examining *fu-bi* as an aesthetic principle can be valuable in the study of author–text–audience dynamics in long-form narratives like the novel and

television drama series, as well as in comparative adaptational studies—especially since our experience of adaptations *as adaptation* tends to dominantly involve such retrospective acts of aesthetic appreciation (i.e., given our prior knowledge of the source text’s likely narrative trajectory, at least part of our attention is likely to be engaged with how the adaptation tells us what [we think] we already know).

A more comprehensive understanding of how *fu-bi*/foreshadowing functions can potentially inform other areas of research, such as television studies or cognitive literary studies. The issue of attention and mind-wandering, for instance, has been of much critical interest to literary scholars like Karin Kukkonen and Sibylle Baumbach (see their 2022 essay in *Diegesis*). Since “our capacity for processing information is limited,” Kukkonen and Baumbach explain that “the human mind [consequently] selects and responds to small subsets of stimuli that are relevant in a specific information at a specific time” (2). Examining how the audience infers (or fails to infer) the workings of *fu-bi* can thus illuminate how our minds assess associative relevance, attribute attentional salience, or even draw patterns where none may have been intended. Similarly, there has been recent interest in television studies in points of convergence between cognitive operations and aesthetic appreciation: see, for example, Ted Nannicelli and Héctor J. Pérez’s volume of essays, *Cognition, Emotion, and Aesthetics in Contemporary Serial Television* (2021).

Zhong Xueping observes that television dramas are “[o]ne of the major storytelling forms in China today” (1), one that has absorbed, transformed, and at times reshaped other artistic genres such as fiction, theater, and film. Sarah Cardwell makes a related argument for television as “one of the primary sources of artworks in Western societies today” (75). However, despite being one of the most widely circulated and frequently accessed global art forms today, scholars like Cardwell, Horace Newcomb, Deborah L. Jaramillo, and others rightly observe that the “struggle for television’s aesthetic legitimacy” persists—as partly evidenced by the limited vocabulary and methods for discussing televisual aesthetics, where calling a television series “cinematic” is still widely regarded as one of the highest forms of praise (Jaramillo 70; Mills 63–65; see both essays for a fuller explication of the problems with doing so). Examining *fu-bi* as aesthetic principle can thus expand our critical methodology for discussing television aesthetics, even as we recognize its efficacy for analyzing other artforms.

Notes

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- 1 James Phelan uses the term *narrative progression* to account for “the synthesis of both the textual dynamics that govern the movement of the narrative” and the “readerly dynamics” that “follow[] from and influence those textual dynamics” (3).
- 2 See, for instance, the work of Tobin (2018), Wei (2023), and Levine (2003). Meir Sternberg’s definition of surprise—which Wei An-Tung notes “hinges on ‘a more or less perceptible suppression’ of earlier events that is followed by ‘a sudden retrospective illumination of what has gone before’” (91)—relies on such effects of foreshadowing.
- 3 Narrative theorist Gerald Prince emphasizes that the “advance mention” (such as foreshadowing) “is not to be confused with the advance notice. The former does not constitute an example of prolepsis; the latter does” (4).
- 4 Circa fourteenth- to early twentieth-century.
- 5 *Dao* [道] is a complex Chinese philosophical concept with more than 2,000 years of history: though it’s impossible to do the concept justice in a few lines, the word is most often translated as *way* and is central to Chinese ethics and philosophy—akin to the significance of the terms *being* or *truth* in Western philosophy (Hansen, “Daoism”).

- 6 See, for instance, Paula Varsano's (ed.) *The Rhetoric of Hiddenness in Traditional Chinese Culture* and Gu Ming Dong's "Aesthetic Suggestiveness in Chinese Thought."
- 7 David L. Rolston notes that much of the critical vocabulary used in Chinese fiction criticism "comes from art criticism, and different techniques pointed out in the novel are explicitly labeled as painterly techniques"; in turn, Chinese landscape painting was "conceived of as a narrative art form," with a spatialized narrative flow (14). This emphasis on adumbration is similarly detectable in other cultures: for example, in Junichirō Tanizaki's essay on Japanese aesthetics, *In Praise of Shadows* (1977), the novelist argues that beauty is found "in the patterns of shadows" (46). Tanizaki's hope amid the gradual vanishing of shadows in Japanese architecture, crafts, theater, and more, is that "there might still be somewhere, possibly in literature or the arts, where something [of this world of shadows] could be saved" (63).
- 8 A note on the use of names: all Romanized *pin-yin* Chinese names follow the convention of surname (e.g., Ouyang) followed by given name (e.g., Xiu); all others follow the order of first names preceding last names (e.g., Eugene Wang).
- 9 As David Rolston, Andrew Plaks, Li Dian, and others have noted, poetry has historically been regarded as the literary genre *par excellence* in Chinese culture and, "[i]n effect, the philosophy of poetry has become the philosophy of [Chinese] literature as a whole" (Li 576); I thus draw partly on this tradition in my discussion of Chinese narrative arts.
- 10 In *Elements of Surprise* (2018), Vera Tobin similarly discusses "burying information" as a key strategy for "hiding critical information," which is "planted in such a way that its true significance is only revealed later"—an effect "managed by downplaying the prominence of that information through a variety of backgrounding techniques, as well as by underspecifying critical details" that misdirect the audience (113).
- 11 Dictionary entry for *fu* [伏]: <https://dict.cn/search?q=%E4%BC%8F>.
- 12 "[N]arrative is the representation of events, consisting of *story* and *narrative discourse*; story is an *event* or sequence of events (the *action*); and *narrative discourse* is those events as represented" (Abbott 19). For a more comprehensive discussion of the story–discourse distinction, see chapter two of Abbott's *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*.
- 13 The Chinese web novel has since been published in four printed volumes by Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing (2022), while the televisual adaptation was released on video streaming platforms Tencent Video (WeTV), iQiyi, and others from 5 July 2022. As of 31 December 2022, the series topped the list of all available programs on WeTV globally, the international platform for one of China's largest video streaming services Tencent Video—not only for the calendar year of 2022, but also its "All Time Top" list (i.e., as compared to all available programming on WeTV since its launch in 2018). The series is subtitled in simplified and traditional Chinese, English, Thai, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Malay, Arabic, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, and French on WeTV, and has also been picked up by broadcasters in Canada (TalentVision), Malaysia (8TV), Singapore (Starhub), and the US (SinoVision), among others.
- 14 The author discusses the novel's historical basis in an interview with Yu Jing. For a discussion on the prevalent practice of adapting Chinese web novels for television, see my essay, "Screen to Screen: Adaptation and Transnational Circulation of Chinese (Web) Novels for Television" in *Media Culture in Transnational Asia*, edited by Hyesu Park (Rutgers University Press, 2020).
- 15 Linda Hutcheon uses the term *knowingness* to distinguish between members of the audience who recognize a text's adaptive status from those who do not: "awareness of the adaptation's enriching, palimpsestic doubleness" occurs as the source text "oscillate[s] in our memories [. . .]. In the process we inevitably fill in any gaps in the adaptation with information from the adapted text" (120–121).
- 16 In Phelan's rhetorical model of narrative, the term *instability* characterizes unstable relationships between characters, while the term *tension* denotes unstable relationships between the implied author (and/or narrator) and the authorial audience (3, 16). Phelan further distinguishes between *local* and *global* instabilities: "Local instabilities are those whose resolution does not signal the completeness of the [narrative] progression; global instabilities are those that provide the main track of the progression and must be resolved for a narrative to attain completeness" (16).
- 17 In line with the *Book of Rites* [《礼记》], men in China used to adopt an additional coming-of-age name upon reaching maturity.
- 18 The switching of the cousins' identities was facilitated by their close physical resemblance to each other and Ling Yi's general apathy toward his son (ep. 46).
- 19 At least to this reader, though I suspect my experience is not idiosyncratic; see, for instance, this vlog which similarly suggests more comprehensive foreshadowing in the drama series as compared to the

- novel, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07Su_aSVSQY&t=177s. The term used in the vlog is *pu-dian* [铺垫]—a variant on the term *fu-bi*—which loosely translates to paving or cushioning.
- 20 Junhua is frequently referred to in derogatory terms, such as a “madwoman [疯女人]” (ep. 48), and even judged at one point to be “feigning insanity [装疯卖傻]” (ep. 24). While both narratives are relatively congruent in their depictions of Junhua, the drama series suggests that her cognitive disorientation stems from post-traumatic distress resulting from the carnage she witnessed in Gu City (ep. 50), while Zisheng clarifies in the novel that though it was initially a ruse—to ensure Ling Yi remained out of the Emperor’s favor, thus protecting Zisheng—she eventually went mad with grief over the private loss of her son, which remained a secret between aunt and nephew until her death (ch. 173).
 - 21 Ling Yi and his co-conspirators were determined to wipe out the entire line of Huo descendants to prevent any possible survivors from taking revenge (ep. 50).
 - 22 On WeTV, the line is translated in English as: “Young lady, you offer aid to the weak and the poor; words cannot express my gratitude” (ep. 16). I have retained a more literal translation of the term “子侄们” (literally, your sons and nephews)—which Zisheng uses in reference to himself, as a respectful term of address when a member of the younger generation addresses a family elder—because it is crucial to the point I am making about *fu-bi* here. (All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.)
 - 23 For example, when Shaoshang remarks on the resemblance between Zisheng and a portrait of Huo Chong, the Crown Princess remarks: “Boys do indeed resemble their mother’s brothers [外甥肖舅]” (ep. 31).
 - 24 See Thomas Leitch’s essay, “Mind the Gaps,” for distinctions between horizontal and vertical gaps, mediant versus terminal gaps. Another Chinese aesthetic principle that draws extensively on the concept of gaps is *liu-bai* [留白], which literally means “[l]eaving the empty space”—an art of absence (or omission) with a long history in classical Chinese ink painting that continues to influence contemporary Chinese arts, such as animation, film, and more (Yeh and Davis 175; Yang 35).
 - 25 The English translation of *xing ren* [杏仁] on WeTV alternates between a longstanding confusion of the Mandarin Chinese terms for apricots and almonds, but the depiction of the apricot fruit in episode 50 makes the referent clear. The reference to an almond allergy in episodes 46 and 49 is thus a translation error; Zisheng is allergic to apricot.
 - 26 These events are original to the drama series and are not part of the web novel; I use the terms *author* and *authorial design* here in reference to the joint effort by the entire television production team (including the director, screenwriters, actors, etc.).
 - 27 The “ethics of the telling” refers to ethical positions that involve “the narrator’s relation to the characters, the task of narrating, and to the audience; and the implied author’s relation to these things” (Phelan 11). I suspect that readers do not necessarily always experience the “morally troubling feeling” that Morson identifies (44); rather, it seems likely that we take up different positions depending on the text’s configuration of events and characters: we may just as easily relish such knowledge (e.g., when comeuppance is forthcoming for an antagonist’s series of misdeeds or when the tide is about to turn on unfavorable circumstances).
 - 28 My attention to this point about Lou was inspired by this vlog: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-yi2kWPdPI&t=407s>.
 - 29 For an extensive discussion of foreshadowing’s complex effects on temporality, see chapter two of Morson’s *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time*.
 - 30 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZF5dyLxo4A&t=263s>.
 - 31 Ellen Spolsky and Thomas Leitch have variously made similar points in relation to gaps: Leitch points to how gaps in detective stories depend on readers’ “sense of not-yet-knowing or not-yet-seeing a pattern they trust will be revealed to them in the fullness of time” (67), while Spolsky points to cognitive theorists’ interests in examining “what brain mechanisms might underlie the ability to complete the patterns a narrative adumbrates in a way that provides a satisfying interpretation” (193).

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