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Paradox of Chinese Boxes: Textual Heterarchy in Postmodern Fiction

The "Chinese box" strategy is almost as ancient as the story-telling art. It is employed in almost all generic forms — epics, plays, poems, short stories, prose works, and novels across divergent historical periods and cultural realms. It is so widespread among the narrative literature of all cultures and periods as to approach universality. While this ubiquity alone would justify critical interest, its pervasiveness and recurrence also present a formidable challenge for discussion. One of the difficulties inherent in the current discussion of the Chinese box strategy has to do with typology. Traditionally Chinese box narratives can be categorized into three types according to their formal structures. The first type includes the stories within a story. Unambiguous examples of this type are *The Thousand and One Nights*, *Decameron*, and the *Canterbury Tales*, in which several inner stories are linked together by means of an outer story. Each time a new story is introduced, a new set of conventions is outlined and a new story realm is instantiated. In other words, the outer narrative only serves to motivate a series of inner stories. Obviously this multi-storied narrative differs from the second type — the single-storied frame narratives, such as *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Heart of Darkness*, in which the different fictional worlds are presented not so much as separate and discrete stories with separate motifs, but as alternative perspectives of causality and morality on a single story. Usually, the first-introduced outer narrative is only a fragment, whereas the second-introduced inner narrative is fully developed and, therefore, unfolded dramatically before the reader. The third type of Chinese box narrative reverses the emphasis: the outer story becomes the main one, and the inner or inserted story is a fragment. *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are two famous examples of this type. In the case of *mise en abyme*, the containing and contained narratives share the same identity.

Apparently, this typology bespeaks a certain subservience to the logic of rigid formal classification. But this ordering is useful as a fulcrum by which to open a new conceptual box to contain a broader discussion of Chinese box narratives

from a different perspective, so that we can distinguish some features of its application in postmodern literature from its ancient vicissitudinous forms. The typology described above does not include the mode of discourse in consideration, and, as a result, leaves out another way of classifying Chinese box narratives: the paradoxical and the non-paradoxical. The paradoxical Chinese box strategy appears frequently in postmodern fiction, reflecting the very paradoxical nature of its own discourse. If postmodernism has been witnessing the revival and flourishing of the Chinese box strategy, it has capitalized on that strategy to institute a fresh range of "disquieting puzzles and paradoxes" (McHale 114), demanding of their overinformed and textually trained postmodern reader greater efforts and, of course, also providing fresh rewards. These puzzling features can be found in such diverse works as Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, Claude Simon's *The Battle of Pharsalus*, John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*, D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, Christine Brooke-Rose's *Thru*, Graham Swift's *Waterland*, and Michael Joyce's hypertext fiction *Afternoon*. All these works, while refurbishing some family resemblances to their forebears, manifest a new kind of taxonomic characteristic and help shaping a new type of Chinese box narrative: the postmodern paradoxical that distinguishes itself from the traditional non-paradoxical. It is in the light of paradoxicalness that I intend to open a new discussion of the Chinese box strategy in postmodern discourse.

As Nicholas Falletta observes in *The Paradoxicon*, "Regardless of their type, paradoxes tend to exhibit several characteristics. Chief among these is contradiction, but self-reference and vicious circularity are often present, too. Paradoxes generally possess a good measure of ambiguity, and their solutions frequently involve sorting out various meanings or interpretations embedded in the ordinary language or images that form them" (xix). In postmodern fiction, we find ample illustrations of the Chinese box strategy linked to a powerful impulse that paradoxically both purifies its salient feature and underscores the variety to which it lends itself, submitting to a decorum of its own creation, and contributing to the elaboration of fresh renovations. In other words, Chinese box fiction in the postmodern era, unlike writing in the era that Roland Barthes posits for the "readable" text, usually employs the Chinese box strategy in a self-reflexive mode; such use of the Chinese box strategy, by destabilizing the conventional concept of this strategy, makes the very application of this strategy a part of the message. Since "paradoxes, in general, can delight or trouble," as Linda Hutcheon observes, "we shall be either seduced by their frustrating teasing or upset with their frustrating lack of resolution" (x). The use of the Chinese box strategy in postmodern writing demonstrates a paradoxical relationship with the tradition of this strategy, one that might be seen as a "reworking" rather than a "return."

Postmodern practice has broadened the concept of the Chinese box strategy, which means much more in the era of postmodernism. It is used more often as a metaphor for a quality or a mode of discourse of a narrative than as a formal description of structure. Several of the points that I will make about the postmodern Chinese box strategy require this change in our sense of the figure within the term, because to confine the Chinese box strategy to "frame narratives" or "stories within a story" will risk circumscribing the notion to only a number of relatively conventional examples. By postmodern Chinese box narrative, I mean the work of textual heterarchy, which may be multi-levelled, multi-texted, multi-storied, multi-worlded, and multi-faceted; but one thing is certain: the interaction among all the narrative boxes in the work generates the main concern of that particular work. It is worth noting that postmodern Chinese box narratives readily exceed the traditional limits of the frame narrative or the story within a story. Deprived of the usual narrative focus, postmodern Chinese box fictions are frequently informed by systems of interrelated narrative boxes that do not contribute to a coherent and generalized narrative development, but rather break the narrative continuity, standing out against or being readily isolable before blending into the contextual patterning. One might say that, in its most ambitious form, the postmodern practice extends, reshapes, and reanimates what may be called the Chinese box convention. The added dimensions make possible a previously unavailable inclusiveness, with its concomitant confusions and pleasures, which draw on the expanded field of fiction available only to the postmodern era. An increasing number of postmodern Chinese box fictions displace conventional questions of plot, character, setting, and point of view with new questions of organization, narrative tension, and textual interplays. They may involve at least what Mikhail Bakhtin calls carnivalesque mode, novelistic dialogism, heteroglossia and stratification; however, some other characteristics are also becoming noticeable.

The postmodern Chinese box strategy contributes to the visibility of postmodern fiction's textual heterarchy — a complex and obtrusive narrative configuration — a sort of radical juxtaposition or fabrication of the spatial planes, which assembles a set of narratives in a relation both of discontinuity and of continuity so that the reader is required to perform successive acts of resignification and recontextualization of previously established meanings. In this sense, the Chinese box strategy evokes a form of narrative democratization or absence of hierarchy. In its radical multiplication of centres of power and in its dissolution of every kind of totalization, textual heterarchy subverts the unitary discourse and annunciates shattered discourses that are paradoxically hinged by their complicity with a spatializing procedure of narrative acts. As Ross Chambers observes:

Narrative of this kind could be considered an exemplification, within the limits of a "book," of certain paradoxical characteristics of textuality, in particular the existence of

"texts" (in the plural) as distinguishable items, combined, however, with degrees of relation between them that can only be accounted for by positing a mediating Text (in the singular), the ultimate philosophical question being whether the latter constitutes a completely totalizable and closed "general economy" (which would imply the ultimate possibility of fully reconciling the different texts) or whether, because it is non-totalizable, only "restricted economies" exist. (1992, 1-2)

The interplay between the totalizable inner textual boxes certainly spatializes Text, and also contributes a level of complexity to postmodern narrative. But, to the crowded, chaotic field of complicating factors, the Chinese box strategy may also contribute a level of orchestration, making readily visible those confrontational cooperations that might otherwise melt into narrative entanglements. There is a noticeable paradox in the play of the Chinese box strategy: sometimes it serves to foreground the book's structure, itself a function of arrangement of stories and inner texts; but by marking the gaps and enforcing the leaps, it also helps make postmodern fiction's discontinuity more challenging and slows up progress or regress. Furthermore, by facilitating diversity, it contributes to the combinatorial impact of a multi-faceted work, turning structure into the prime adventure and making organization one of the principal sources of interest and action. By making unexpected juxtapositions, it also enlarges the space between the surface and depth of the postmodern fiction, and, as a result, shakes the reader out of complacent habits of apprehension. So, while rejecting conventional narrative structure, postmodern Chinese box fiction generally accepts responsibility for the new freedoms and qualities it generates. These new qualities, however, do not rule out the tension between the new freedoms and the conventions they subvert — tensions sharpened by the fact that traditions are available as trace material in the texts bent on deconstructing them. To a greater or lesser degree, all Chinese box fictions toy with narrative conventions. This toying, however, generally has the spirit of reflexivity, tending toward a parodic effect, an invention upon a recognizable form with the intent of producing difference. In short, despite the risk they run of confusing their reader or overloading him with readerly responsibilities, postmodern Chinese box fictions do have the best of both convention and invention.

Because it breaks down our habitual way of understanding and experiencing frame narratives and stories within a story, postmodern Chinese box fiction has important implications for our changing conception of Chinese box narrative in a broad sense. If we consider traditional theories and some current poetics of the Chinese box narratives, we can see several of the false starts critics have made toward (mis)understanding its implications in postmodern fiction, which usually depend upon a metaphysical assumption of the possibility of distinction between "levels" or "frames." Mieke Bal and Susan S. Lanser, for example, have worked diligently to make distinction between embedded and embedding narratives, and between characters who narrate and those who merely speak (see Bal

and Lanser). Actually, in most cases of postmodern Chinese box fiction, it is extremely difficult to distinguish the individual textual levels or inner narrative borders, because, as Patricia Waugh observes, the borderlines between the various narrative levels, between frame and the enframed, and between the story and "the story in a story," are often obliterated or broken down (28-34). In such works, the Chinese box strategy draws on a radical blurring of the borders of narratives and texts. Often the boundaries are deliberately short-circuited, either as a metaphorical or satiric reflection on structure or as a manifestation of the author's freedom from the need to make such structures. So, one paradox of the postmodern Chinese box strategy is that it continually and pointedly deconstructs and undercuts its own multi-level systems against the grain of the traditional operations, putting emphasis upon multilinks and cross-fertilizations in an interwoven network of narratives. This paradox distinguishes postmodern narrative heterarchy from traditional narrative hierarchy. The postmodern Chinese box strategy suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, rather than binary opposition and exclusion.

For the convenience of discussion, however, I think that we should localize the inner levels and borders of a Chinese box fiction in textual apposition. Textual apposition in postmodern Chinese box texts has several manifestations specified by the differences in narrators, parameters of possible events, audiences, motifs, ideologies of different worlds, genres, expositional modes, and even versions of "realities." Textual apposition in the Chinese box narrative can also be marked by the cultural, conceptual, ontological, linguistic, and experiential units. However, textual appositions can be neatly sorted out and bifurcated by the author along the general matrix of the embedding versus the embedded; but the author may also choose to blur or integrate these borders more subtly and smoothly into the composition of the work so that the tension between these opposing texts simply depends on "readerly" or "writerly" perspective relativism.

Perhaps the most pervasive and common use of the Chinese box strategy in postmodern fiction is to juxtapose inner texts. Simply stated, what I am calling juxtaposition is an extension of a narrative form that creates structures without Todorovian "subordination" (cf. Todorov). Conventional novels and even many that are unconventional have always adhered to the principle of organic order, stressing proper "subordination," imposing not only regularity, or the illusion of an orderly surface, but also a hierarchical arrangement of materials on all levels of their discourse. But postmodern Chinese box fictions often violate this dominant narrative decorum, and perhaps no age has ever seen anything like the florid disjunction so obvious in the narrative production of postmodernism. Even in *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* one would find nothing to compare to the radical but superbly controlled textual juxtaposition of *Mulligan Stew*. In its generic mixture of poems, journals, letters, notebooks, and fiction, this massive

novel presents us with a radical textual heterarchy. There is no reason to accept the demand that we keep a proper subordination of levels in this novel, since every level interacts with every other. Anthony Lamont, the central character of the book, is a novelist, who tells us about his characters and the characters also turn back to comment on the author. As a result, a large part of *Mulligan Stew* consists of Lamont's writing and various material written by other people. Indeed, only in the era of postmodernism does fiction start to avail itself of juxtaposition, disjunction, and stylistic discord to complicate its structure, enliven its texture, and accent its meaning. Paradoxically, however, through its juxtapositional form, the Chinese box strategy could also be the most powerful ordering device, because it can facilitate the conjunction of radically different materials and lend itself to the generation of works, frequently in a mock-encyclopedic vein, or mock-museum form, or mock-library arrangement, which develop a logic of confrontational cooperation.

Texts organized by the Chinese box strategy often suggest self-imposed deprivation or radical liberation from narrative constraints by elaborating systems of echoes, textual permutations, collage sequences, interlinking narratives, to which the reader does not have immediate recourse in the quest to impose a system of coherence. We may of course find these procedures in almost any postmodern text, but the most elaborate dramatizations of them are to be found in Chinese box fiction. Such structures and procedures may be in some measure consciously elaborated, as demonstrated by Simon's *The Battle of Pharsalus*. Simon's book is composed of a plurality of fragmented narrative screens which reflect and overlap creating an overall effect of a textual heterarchy of interfaced narratives. A sequence concerning characters and events in a particular setting may at any moment be displaced by another sequence concerning quite different characters and events in a different setting. There are also fragmentary quotations from a heterogeneous range of authors: Elie Faure rubs shoulders with Proust, Plutarch; a popular history of the First World War exists side by side with a sequence from a comic strip. At the centre of this play of diversity and refraction, the novel's main narrative revolves around the historical enigma of the battle of Pharsalus. From a broader point of view, the collage quality of *The Battle of Pharsalus* can be seen as inciting the reader to follow closely the multiple trails which lead from one textual interpolation to another. The Chinese box strategy in this novel constantly challenges various fictional preoccupations of narrative, providing the reader with multiple extensions for exploration and decipherment. In short, Chinese box fictions are paradoxical texts that foreground their labyrinthine intricacy and textual heterarchy, while calling upon the reader to find and even produce a rationale. Two aspects of the postmodern Chinese box strategy are particularly noteworthy: the attempt to present simultaneously, if not always schematically, all sides of a given object such as "world," "history," "self," and "mind," and

the tendency to break the object into components that can be neither conjoined smoothly from the reader's perspective nor considered as separate entities. The result is a tension between coherence and fragmentation. By obliging the reader to consider such fragments as both disjunct and conjunct, the Chinese box strategy installs a new internal multilink system in narrative. That is, the reader will experience the text as a concatenation of narratives and also as a spatial unit, a narrative dialectic or interaction. The temporal and spatial component of the process of experiencing a text is thus confused and greatly amplified. In such novels as *Pale Fire*, *Mulligan Stew*, and *The White Hotel*, the Chinese box strategy breaks down the fictional world into several interlaced inner narratives from which objects in a spatial field emerge and reverberate. These fictions also incorporate a process of gradual freeing of the novel from its generic limitations, leading to a full sense of the Chinese box strategy as trans-generic carrier. Most traditional novels operate along a linear sequence, and they use and encourage the reader to use familiar codes of linearity specific to the novel. But postmodern Chinese box fictions disrupt traditional codes with their simultaneity and fragmentation. They require other general codes that we use in reading a postmodern novel: for example, we compare, associate, re-organize, and even recreate. Actually almost all Chinese box fictions require a re-reading process, which is much more selective, nonsequential, and associative than that of the initial reading. When one re-reads *Pale Fire*, for instance, one may begin at several different points, not necessarily at the "Foreword," even with the "Index," then read the novel backward selectively. The re-reading process is a process of establishing interrelationship among inner narratives through nonsequential selection and association. Usually only through re-reading, can one realize a Chinese box novel's understructural meaning. As a result, one's view of the novel is also broadened by the active re-reading process.

In some postmodern works, the Chinese box strategy is based on a process of proliferation in which the disjointed fragments open up into a configuration of changeable patterns. The effect has much in common with that of a kaleidoscope. As William H. Gass notes, "We are all familiar with the kind of kaleidoscope which has no colored chips, itself, to shuffle about, but contains in its tube only mirrors and an eye-piece through which any aspect of the world is shattered and rearranged according to a new geometry" (98). In postmodern Chinese box fiction, the reader is presented with multiple possibilities of reading, and as a result, with multiple conclusions. This does not simply mean that the reader has to take over some of the writer's role and function, but that the reader is responsible for realizing the text. *Lost in the Funhouse*, *Waterland*, and *Mulligan Stew*, for example, are all multiple, plural, fragmented, and intertwined with many tales and inner texts. The reader is forced to serve as an agent of their architecture: he is required to find or establish a meaningful relationship, or rather an interrelationship, among the inner narrative boxes, a

relationship capable of linking and of cross-fertilizing the diverse materials of the narrative. To use Roland Barthes's terminology, entering such a novel is "entrance into a network with a thousand entrances; to take this entrance is to aim, ultimately ... at a perspective (of fragments of voices from other texts, other codes), whose vanishing point is nonetheless ceaselessly pushed back, mysterious opened" (12). In postmodern Chinese box fiction, therefore, reading, or rather re-reading, may be a heterarchical process of association. Fragmented inner texts may be associated in different ways to create various kaleidoscopic views. One is encouraged to realize one's own version of a novel: shake the tube and see what comes out.

Postmodern Chinese box fiction requires us to change our concepts of some fictional elements such as action and plot. A widespread conception of narrative plot, inspired by Russian formalists' definition of *fabula*, is that it consists of a linear sequence of events, determined by what happened "in effect" in the world referred to by the text. The most inclusive position from contemporary theory would accept the basic postulate of narratology, which holds that all "stories" — narratologists' term for *fabula* — can be told in any number of narrative media, as Seymour Chatman puts it, that the "transposability of story is the strongest reason for arguing that narratives are indeed structures independent of any medium" (20). But in postmodern Chinese box fiction, it is difficult and almost impossible to separate *fabula* from discourse without distortion; in other words, in an era when the medium becomes the message, stories can no longer be said to be totally independent of its medium. Far from being limited to what objectively happened, narrative boxes can be narratives of "possible" stories or worlds, some actual and some virtual, some "told" and some "untold" (Wilson 1990a, 209-237; 1986, 138-162). Since narrative universes are not only composed of a physical world, a realm of factual events, but also inhabited by human beings, whose minds may project numerous immaterial "worlds," such as dreams, memories, wishes, and imaginations, in which other possible worlds may be embedded. In *Pale Fire*, for instance, the main stories seem to exist in the characters' minds, and none of them can be regarded as *fabula*. With its play of mirroring between a fictional poet's poem and the fictional meta-fictional commentary, the novel presents a number of important events associated with the enigmatic kingdom Zembla. But because the ontological status of the kingdom is ambiguous, we will never know for certain whether these events happened in effect or not. Therefore, if fictional representations can be contained in characters' minds, a plot should be regarded as layered entities made up of several distinct mental universes, which definitely include imagined spaces, "untold" worlds, contemplated events, and wished actions.

Quite often it is the interaction between these contemplated possible worlds and the "actual" worlds that confer meaning upon a Chinese box novel as a whole (see Hart). These mental representations share the same structure as the

story of which they are a part, and therefore are embedded narratives, for they also link states and events in a causal pattern, though maybe in an anachronic manner. When talking about "the formulation of story to a 'conceptualization' or a 'heuristic fiction,'" Robert Rawdon Wilson points out:

An embedded narrative (that is, any narrative that is contained within another narrative either through the voice of a character, abruptly transformed into a narrator, or through the use of some other convention such as the inclusion of extraneous discourse in the form of letters, messages, journals, or any other heterodiegetic inscription) breaks the time scheme of the narrative that incorporates it. It opens a fissure in the narrative order of the text that, whether one thinks of this sequence as chronological or as radically perturbed (where, say, the chronology could be restored only on the level of story), introduces a different time scheme into the narrative.... Thus embedded narratives construct a textual anachrony that is different from the anachrony (if any) that the containing, homodiegetic narrative may possess. (1990a, 230)

In postmodern Chinese box fiction, the plot is less a linear or sequential development than a narrative configuration or anachronistic heterarchy, which can take several kinds of patterns — shapes, configuration, paradigms, geometrical forms, figural presences. As Wilson observes, "Such patterns are understood in, and recalled in, spatial terms. Diversely exemplified, but structurally unmodified, they persist unchanged through both text sequence and textual diachronicity and, to be understood, all their parts need to be grasped together" (1990a, 182). Chronologically discontinuous, a postmodern Chinese box novel may be composed of layers of anachronically heterogeneous narratives; it is not constructed according to a preconceived, natural, logical-chronological frame of reference, but reconstructed by means of readers' perspectival choices. Linear or sequential developments are often drawn into the vortex of relative time.

My next point is that the Chinese box strategy supplies the necessary spatial system for plotless or relatively plotless "reverie" structures. These structures ground their formal coherence on the availability of echoes generated by the signifying systems embedded in and radiating from differentiated contexts. Such systems need not and should not be apprehended in their entirety. Their surplus, after all, contributes to the effect of infinity and the frustrating satisfaction derived from the awareness that there will always be further levels, worlds, and other spaces. Without resorting to the tired image of a dreamer, the interplay among different narrative boxes evokes an effect that has much in common with that of a dream-text — a metaphoric and metonymic network of experience where subject and object are reversible. In *The White Hotel*, for example, the stratifications of temporality (past/present) and voice (a diversity of enunciations) and mental vision (memory — the real/fantasy — the fictional) are all convoluted. The implied terrain of existence in the two sections "Don Giovanni"

and "The Gastain Journal" may be a subjective "landscape of hysteria" that hovers between hallucination and nightmare, but it is also metaphorically objective. If we are to read the various narrative boxes as a series of recurring dreams and mental narratives, the distinction between the objective and the subjective is no more resolutely fixed than the distinction between irrational states of mind and the irrationality of certain events in modern history. Not that there is no distinction — otherwise there would be no point to Thomas's elaborate juxtaposition — but the two run into each other; subjective hysteria is discovered to be an entirely accurate predictive index of objective experience later on in the novel. Partly in consequence, this novel is marked by a variety of contexts in which fantastical and historical events are anachronically interfaced and causally interrelated.

Discussing the spatial systems created by the Chinese box strategy, we cannot avoid talking about the distinction between textual domain and ontological territory within the narrative. Such a distinction might be arbitrary but necessary. The textual domain is a virtual space, like the space in a mirror or a movie screen. This virtual space provides a window through which the reader may look at another world, such as the "untold world" which is merely alluded to but never given an access (Wilson 1990b, 22-47). The ontological territory is supposed to be a materialized, "real" world with an opened door through which the reader may step into this different space. The crossing of an ontological border leads into a new system of "reality," centred in a new "actual" world; while virtual borders mediate only between narrative acts, they signal changes in narrative voices or registers. Because domains and territories differ in their nature, we probably should distinguish two kinds of Chinese box narratives: the virtual and the actual. But since the Chinese box world in postmodern fiction can be in various forms — concentric, juxtapositional, and regressive, the storyworlds of both domain and territory may be intertwined. Within a Chinese box narrative, the status of embedded world, whether a domain or a territory, is not always clear-cut. In some postmodern novels, the issue of "virtual-actual" is only a play of "figure-ground reversal." One purpose of the Chinese box strategy is to challenge us to compare and to judge the two or more worlds, presented adjacently and ambiguously. The play of ambiguity entails more than narrative density: it often brings into focus a wide range of epistemological aporia and ontological conundrums.

Without a privileged or "objective" presentation, postmodern Chinese box fiction may create a *trompe-l'oeil* effect: the reader is encouraged to rearrange constantly the fragmented, nested representations for "realities," consciously or unconsciously following the processes by which the novel came into being. The Chinese box strategy, when writing is one of its main concerns, usually enacts, or better, builds into the narrative discourse its own production. As a result, the reader participates more or less directly in the production of the text as action

through a medium that purports to carry directly the words of an active protagonist, words that include commentary on the circumstances of his or her writing. As one traces the textual source of the narrative configuration, one simultaneously perceives and engages with narrative acts struggling to grow out of its own language and texture. This is particularly true with what Steven G. Kellman calls self-begetting novels. A self-begetting novel "is an account, usually first-person, of the development of a character to the point at which he is able to take up his pen and compose the novel we have just finished reading. Like an infinite recession of Chinese boxes, the self-begetting novel begins again where it ends" (cf. Kellman). Such a novel seems bent on dramatizing its production, making writing as gesture an important part of its subject matter, and drawing upon the writing process for its narrative substance.

The Chinese box fictions that are written completely or partially in this form, such as *The Golden Notebook* and *Lost in the Funhouse*, constitute a variant of this convention. Such novels, when structured with the Chinese box strategy, are not only self-begetting, but also self-reflexive — that is, the novel turns the artist's mode into a metaphor for its own concerns, a metafiction that is conscious of its own fictivity, transforming the process of writing into the subject of writing. However, we may see in narrative self-reflexivity a further manifestation of truth-relativization. By questioning and even denying the value of reproducible "reality," which is supposed to be the foundation of the novel, postmodern Chinese box fiction declares the independence of art from a validity that it cannot hope to convey. Paradoxically but appropriately, it also brings into play encoded but undecipherable acts and images with an immediacy that can be keyed to the psychic life of both writer and reader, a multilink network of experience of creating, analyzing, and sharing a text. "Reality" is thus understood as a complex interplay of objective experience and the subjective ordering of that experience by both the writer and the reader. Under this condition, these novels manifest a sense of democracy; that is, when certain controls are removed from texts that are traditionally full of authorial, predetermined "realities," what reigns is a relatively unmediated, nonauthorial raw truth whose keys are less important than its impact on readers.

In an age accustomed to all manner of factitious "truths," it would not be surprising to find that some Chinese box novels are dramatically self-referential or self-regressive. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, McHale proposes several literary implementations of self-regression, such as in Christine Brooke-Rose's *Thru*, where Larissa invents Arnel, who in turn is the author of Larissa. A push into the world of Larissa's invention, then another into the world of Arnel's imagination will bring us back to the world where Larissa invents Arnel (120). This kind of self-regression reminds us of the concept of a "strange loop." In *Gödel, Escher, Bach*, Douglas Hofstadter states that "The 'strange loop' phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the

levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started" (10). Obviously, what Hofstadter calls a "strange loop" is actually a vicious circle, a Chinese box without a bottom, which prevents us from deciding who, Arnel or Larissa, is "really real." Thus, the self-regressive procedure may be seen as an extension of the Chinese box strategy which as a reflexive device bears witness of its own textual heterarchy. Usually, self-regressive Chinese box fictions produce a sense of decentralization and leave us with not only a textual acquisition but also, and more importantly, a sense of perpetuating procedure conducted in the light of the text's writing and unwriting of itself. Through regressive embedding, such novels generally present themselves as the products of a paradoxical process that is available in textual heterarchy.

Probably the best expression of the postmodern Chinese box strategy can be found in hypertext fiction. *Hypertext*, as George P. Landow has noticed, is not a system but a generic term, which refers to the writing done in the nonlinear or nonsequential space made possible by the computer (cf. Landow). Unlike static text, hypertext provides multiple, variable paths between inner texts. With its webs of linked inner texts and its networks of alternate paths, hypertext fiction presents a radically divergent textuality that is multi-sequential and interactive, favouring a plurality of discourses over definitive utterance and freeing the reader from domination by the author. Instead of facing a stable text, the hypertext reader sees only the image of a single "virtual" text on the computer screen. Behind that virtual image lies a nest of Chinese boxes of "possible" texts that can be represented on the screen in different ways, according to the reader's choice of paths to follow.

Hypertext readily fulfils Barthes's description of the "ideal text" whose "networks are many and which interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest.... We gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable" (6). With its fluidity, contingency, indeterminacy, and plurality, hypertext provides a infinitely re-centrable textual heterarchy whose provisional point of focus depends upon the choices made by a truly active reader. Michael Joyce's *Afternoon*, for instance, is a hypertext fiction with many possible "entrances" and changeable points of linkage. Reading this electronic novel, the reader experiences visiting a huge Chinese box of funhouses with numerous forking paths. At first, one encounters puzzling changes of setting, narrator, subject, and chronology. But after reading a while one is attempted to re-arrange narrative placements by assigning each moveable inner text to a provisionally suitable place according to one's understanding. When all or most inner texts are assigned to "appropriate" places, the reader feels satisfied with a conclusive meaning created by himself, and the initial feeling of puzzlement disappears. One of the things that is so

intriguing about *Afternoon* is that it will help us see how we come through a complicated mental process to an entirely new story made up of the same narrative elements.

Inquiry into hypertext will help us theorize postmodern Chinese box fiction, and characterize some of its deep structures. With the help of computer technology, hypertext highlights several important features of postmodern textual heterarchy. As a multilinked system of various inner texts, hypertext eventually subverts our own habit of thinking in terms of linearity and hierarchical trees, and challenges us to reflect on the nature of postmodern discourses. Hypertext, with its multi-sequentiality, flexibility, and expandability, will serve as a powerful analogous model for our examination of the complex processes involved in creating and experiencing postmodern Chinese box narrative. The Chinese box strategy, with its multiplication of centres of power, denies the tendency to organize differences into a unified pattern, to modulate heterarchy into hierarchy. Critical inquiries into the nature of narrative discourse over the past twenty or so years are inordinately preoccupied with linearization and hierarchization. The traditional approach to fiction would concentrate largely on the linear organization of narrative texts. But postmodern Chinese box fiction indicates a new direction in which we can substitute the notion of matrix for the notion of chain, and heterarchy for hierarchy.

We should be aware of the fact that the concept of Chinese box strategy used in this article is based on a heuristic metaphor, which calls our attention to textual heterarchy. As we have seen, postmodern Chinese box fiction assumes the reflexive power of re-contextuality and re-organisational appeal that need not be inspired by a neat hierarchy of relations among inner texts and their constituent elements. Destabilizing chronology, fabula, plot, and sequentiality, the Chinese box strategy proposes a spatialization of textual relations that subordinates diachronic developments to the synchronic structuration of fiction. Although both temporal and spatial dimensions enter into the process of a Chinese box narrative, textual heterarchy should be regarded as capable of interrelating inner narratives in an unforeseeable number of ways, so that the productive recontextualization of text is always open, potentially infinite. The signification of a Chinese box narrative can be explicated by various configurations of inner textual boxes and their interaction.

Textual heterarchy would be a normal situation for postmodern fiction because spatialization and contextual structuration are no longer confined to a small number of typical Chinese box narratives. Most postmodern narrative texts contain more than one narrative level and textual boxes, or they have at least the potential for narrative proliferation and differentiation. The configurations of significant relations produced by the interactions between inner texts, which dilate and expand the textual potential to maximal scope, has broad implication. Since a literary text is multiply encoded, it can enter into different contextual

configurations and interactions, taking on a different set of meanings for each interrelationship. The Chinese box strategy, then, is very much a matter of comparing, associating and evaluating narratives, and reconstructing and transforming them to weave different stories with the same narrative elements which are recontextualizable and full of potential meanings. In other words, the Chinese box strategy does not mean to fix discourse into a hierarchy of levels of isolated units but to reconstruct the interaction between inseparable but disruptive texts. Therefore, the Chinese box strategy can be regarded as a recontextualizing redescription, or a playing off of narratives against each other to fashion and refashion the tale in varied ways. The concept of the Chinese box strategy used in this study reconstructs the fundamental categories of literary experience by stressing the potentiality of productive interactions within a text.

Postmodern Chinese box fiction challenges us to recognize textual heterarchy which insists on coexistence and interaction of different ways of using language. Postmodern Chinese box fiction is marked off from the earlier frame narratives and stories within a story by its syncretic inclusiveness and relativistic tension and re-creative potential. In its radical multiplication of centres of power and in its dissolution of every kind of totalization, the Chinese box strategy evokes a form of narrative democratization. It assembles a set of narratives in a relation both of discontinuity and of continuity, encouraging the reader to perform successive acts of resignification and recontextualization of previously established meanings. Given the irreducible differences among inner texts, a Chinese box fiction does not communicate just one denotative or fully explicable meaning — be it thematic, psychological, or historical. Instead, Chinese box fiction exhibits a cross-fertilizing mediation of parts and wholes, a process of negotiating contradictions that does not always bring to the fore any satisfactory resolution. A monological approach can never account for the variety of narrative configurations invoked by textual heterarchy. Breaking away from the "logical" and "logocentric" tradition with its stable, one-sided view of unity, the Chinese box strategy admits paradoxes and contradictions, which have far-reaching implications for literature in general.

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