

# Text-Image Theory: A New Approach to Literary Semiotics

**Li Yuping**

School of Literature, Nankai University

94 Weijin Road, Nankai District, Tianjin, 300071, China

Email: liyuping@nankai.edu.cn

**Abstract** Chinese scholar Zhao Xianzhang's monograph *Text-Image Theory: Comparative Semiotic Studies on Chinese Traditional Literature and Arts* is one of the new achievements in literary semiotics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The book develops text-image theory from the perspective of literature and it is an innovative research on the basic issues in literary semiotics. The image theory of literature means that literature is a kind of "image-thinking" language logically connected with the world via image. Interculturality and Interdisciplinarity are important features of Zhao's comparative semiotics. His contributions to discussions of Chinese traditional literature and arts and the relationship between text and image are sure to be longstanding.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords** *Text-Image Theory*; Zhao Xianzhang; literary semiotics; Chinese literature

**Author** **Li Yuping**, is Associate Professor at School of Literature, Nankai University. His research interests include literary theory, semiotics and Chinese literature. He is the author of *Intertextuality: New Perspectives in Literary Studies* and *A Theory of Literary Canon in the Multicultural Era*.

Literary theory is one of the grounds of the modern semiotic movement. The study of literary semiotics has a development history of nearly 100 years. A group of outstanding semioticians had laid a solid foundation for this discipline, such as Jan Mukarovsky, Roman Jakobson, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Yuri Lotman, Algirdas Greimas, Umberto Eco, Michael Riffaterre, and the others. Since the 1970s, literary semiotics has become an important topic in semiotics and literary

---

<sup>1</sup> This work forms part of research project "Text-Image Intertextuality in Literature" (20BZW002) funded by the National Social Science Fund of China.

theory; its development has been presented a splendid sight. After entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the advent of the era of globalization and media society, a number of new achievements have emerged in the study of literary semiotics. Chinese scholar Zhao Xianzhang's monograph *Text-Image Theory: Comparative Semiotic Studies on Chinese Traditional Literature and Arts* is just one of the new achievements in literary semiotics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

What is text-image theory in literature? How is it produced? What is the value of its theory and application? What is the main content of it? What is the innovation of it? And, how does it relate to the tradition of literary theory? Here I want to summarize some ideas around these issues according to Professor Zhao's book *Text-Image Theory*.

### **Why Image Theory of Literature?**

The study of the relationship between literature and image has a long history in the West. As early as the ancient Greek period, the poet Simonides of Ceos put forward that "Painting is mute poetry, poetry a speaking picture." This can be regarded as the oldest argument concerning intertextual relationship between literature (poetry) and image (painting). Since then, discussions on the relationship between literature and image can be seen in the canonical writings of Aristotle, Horace's "Ut Pictura Poesis," hermeneutics and iconography in the Middle Ages, classicist Johann Joachim Winckelmann's "picturesque poetry," to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, through to Irving Babbitt's *New Laocoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* and a whole swathe of the-20th-century thought.

After the 1960s, language and image research has become a major intellectual topic in the field of humanities and social sciences. The International Association of Word and Image Studies (IAWIS) was established in the Netherlands in July 1987. IAWIS/AIERTI International Triennial Conferences have successfully held 12 sessions.

The term "text-image theory" is not the original creation of Zhao. There have been several monographs on it in English academic circles. John Bateman's monograph *Text and Image* (2014) focused on theoretical analysis and conducted interdisciplinary research on the relationship between text and image from the perspective of multimodal semiotics. *Art, Word and Image: 2000 Years of Visual / Textual Interaction* (edited by Michael Corris, John Dixon Hunt, et al., 2010) summarized four relationship models of historical evolution through the investigation of the relationship between language and image in different periods.

Zhao's *Text-Image Theory* develops text-image theory from the perspective of literature and it is an innovative research on the basic issues in literary semiotics. He believes that "the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be the century of 'literature and image', or, 'literature and image' may become the fundamental motif of literary theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Zhao 12-13). Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the study of the relationship between literature and image in China and the West was mainly reflected in the research on the relationship between poetry and painting. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the progress of new media and new technology, the popularization of consumer culture, information society, especially the rise of visual culture, literature has also undergone profound changes. The image theory of literature is put forward at the right time, which is a keen theoretical response to "the correlation between mediums and their changes' possible impact on literature" (Zhao 268).

Zhao clarifies his approach by defining the original concept "image theory of literature." His "image theory of literature" is derived from Ludwig Wittgenstein's "picture theory of language" and it means that "literature, as the art of language, is a kind of 'image-thinking' language logically connected with the world via image" (Zhao 14).

Aristotle argued that "literature is the art of language." Accordingly, the relationship between language and image in the field of literature is actually the relationship between literature and image. As the two most important signs of human beings, language and image differ greatly in their functions of signification: the former is a real reference and the latter is a virtual reference. In a sense, literature is achieved by the interactive variation of language's real reference and image's virtual reference. "[W]hat the 'image theory of literature' intends to explore is the relationship between the two signs that have undergone fission and restructuring, as well as their 'new relationship' generated with the world after they coagulate as 'new style'" (Zhao 16).

Zhao's argument concerning the difference between language and image appropriates the ideas of Xu( 虚 ) and Shi( 实 ) in Chinese traditional culture. Xu refers to a wide range of conceptions involving the empty, intangible, elusive, illusory, and indirect. Shi refers to all those opposite or counterpointing to whatever falls under the category of Xu as listed above. According to Zhao, the relation between the signifier and the signified of linguistic sign is "arbitrary" and conventional, while the image sign follows the principle of "similarity." The "arbitrary" relation gives language freedom, allowing for the realization of actual (Shi) signification; the principle of "similarity" means that image is a virtual (Xu) referential sign.

Literature, as the art of language, is the visualization of language, which is in turn the main representation of aestheticization of language. Zhao states, “it means that literature is associated with the world necessarily via ‘verbal icon’ rather than ‘concept’ ” (Zhao 19). Accordingly, “verbal icon” is the key node connecting literature and the world and it is an important starting point for the image theory of literature. The modeling of texts, poetic paintings, literary illustrations, comic strips and image adaptation of literary texts can be regarded as the externalization of “verbal icon.” The exploring of literary “verbal icon” not only depends on the relevant achievements of literary theory, but also needs the support of interdisciplinary research achievements such as linguistics and cognitive psychology.

The image theory of literature revises Abrams’s “coordinates of literary theory,” which has unquestionably produced a tremendous impact on China’s literary theory in the new period. Abrams’s “coordinates of literary theory” composed of “literary works” and the three elements (“author,” “reader” and “world”). Zhao puts forward the “spherical view of literature” and forms a theoretical basis for his image theory of literature. In this new “spherical view of literature,” Abrams’s “coordinates of literary theory” is in the middle; the plane composed of “linguistic works” and the three elements (“author,” “reader” and “world”) is in the front of it, while the plane composed of “artistic works” and the three elements are located at its rear. A new spherical relational structure diagram comes up by stitching together the three planes (Zhao 18).

### **Interculturality and Interdisciplinarity**

A former vice president of International Association for Semiotic Studies, Li Youzheng once argued: “The global movement of semiotics is mainly characterized by its three emerging consequences: the global expansion of the horizon of geographic-historic-cultural territory, the comprehensive widening of scholarly-theoretical perspective from different semiotic traditions, and the deeper reexamination of the all-round relationship among society, culture, and knowledge in the real world”(Li, “General Semiotics” 37). It is not difficult to conclude that interculturality and interdisciplinarity are the remarkable features of the global semiotics.

There is no doubt that semiotics is a West-center science; the theoretical resources of relation between language and image are mainly from the West. The Western semiotics has opened up new possibilities for Chinese literature, bringing into focus issues that were excluded by the earlier approaches. It also brings into

light neglected issues in the earlier Chinese literary studies that now acquire a new theoretical and analytical interest.

Zhao's *Text-Image Theory* is just one of the intercultural achievements in the global semiotics; the image theory of literature is the original contribution of Chinese scholar to literary semiotics. As its subtitle "Comparative Semiotic Studies on Chinese Traditional Literature and Arts" shows, *Text-Image Theory* fully absorbed the Western theory on language and image and traditional Chinese practice in literature and arts, so as to put forward the image theory of literature. Zhao profoundly examines the particularity of Chinese literature and culture and presents the traditions and problems of Chinese literary semiotics.

According to Zhao, this book is mainly "[b]ased on the aesthetic experience of ancient Chinese literature and art, it draws lessons from modern and western theories and methods, intending to use the latter to activate the former and construct an intellectual 'Esperanto' for Sino-Western exchanges" (Zhao, back cover). For example, "The Image Theory of Poetry" (Chapter VII) and "The Illustration Theory of Fiction" (Chapter VIII) are theoretical sublimation of the practice of Chinese traditional literature and arts. "Poetic paintings" are one of the traditional forms of images generated from Chinese poetry. "The expression strategy of poetic paintings is an ingenious combination of 'making visible' and 'shielding', well-organized rhythms impel text-image symbols to play intertextual games and poetry in paintings, partly hidden and partly visible, teases audiences' eyes"(Zhao 229). The illustrations of Chinese fiction can be seen as the resistant expression of narration as well as the deconstruction of fictional narration.

Zhao believes that "if we place the semiotics study into literature-image relationship, or study semiotic issues within the sphere of literature-image relationship, a new 'comparative semiotics' may arise" (Zhao 23). The new "comparative semiotics" will debut in the presence of global scholars. Zhao's "comparative semiotics" naturally includes interculturality and interdisciplinarity.

"As a result of the intimate interaction between the scientific domains of literature and language, the field of literary semiotics comes into existence which represents one of the inter/trans/multidisciplinary branches of modern semiotics today" (Murat 4) . Interdisciplinarity is another important feature of Zhao's comparative semiotics. He presents many enlightening views on interdisciplinarity in *Text-Image Theory*. In his view, interdisciplinarity today is different from the traditional saying that "literature and history are all in one," and its pivotal point is that whether new questions can be discovered between different disciplines, or to say, these "new questions" can only be discovered between different disciplines.

Zhao explains the difference between the image theory of literature and the traditional study of poetry–painting relationship:

The image theory of literature is exactly derived from the new questions discovered between literature and image, thereby determining that it distinguishes itself from the traditional study of poetry–painting relationship. Their differences are reflected not only in the extension of research scope but more in the fact that it is a new learning that confronts reality, which exactly indicates the “literature crisis” and “sign crisis” we are confronting today. For that matter, the image theory of literature, in the first place, faces the question in reality rather than the so-called new question drawn from books. This question can only be discovered between different disciplines such as linguistics, literature, iconography and sociology, and after that, we would stand to reason it in terms of academic study history and academic logic. (Zhao 26)

“‘Interdisciplinarity’ provides a democratic, dynamic and co-operative alternative to the old-fashioned, inward-looking and cliquish nature of disciplines” (Joe 3). The introduction of interdisciplinary methods has brought vitality to literary semiotics. The image theory of literature challenges traditional, outmoded systems of literary theory which are kept in place by institutional power structures; It produces a new, innovative theory and methodology which open up literary studies to new perspectives; It helps people to think more creatively about the relationship between language and image.

### **How to Conduct Literary Semiotic Study?**

How to conduct literary semiotic study in post-theory time? This may be a question that every literary semiotician is deeply troubled by. Zhao’s book *Text–Image Theory* and related discussions provide us with an excellent answer to this question.

In the closing address at National Conference on Language and Image held at Longdong University, Qingyang Gansu in October 2020, Zhao pointed out:

1. Literary study must face reality and refrain from empty talk; In particular, literary theory should be based on providing “theoretical tools” for the whole literary academy to face the reality.
2. Literary research should be deeply rooted in the native land, consciously learn from modern theories and activate the tradition, and naturally generate a discursive channel for communication

with the world in this process. 3. Research methods should be well grounded. While paying attention to logical reasoning, we should pay more attention to “speaking with facts” and displaying with phenomena. Literary theories cannot be made into metaphysics. 4. We should reflect on the significance of our research and weigh the pros and cons of different research methods. (Zhao, “Literature and Image Research” 27)

Zhao’s above four points hit the nail right on the head and his book *Text-Image Theory* sets a good example to us. The book gives us a thoughtful investigation of the relationship between language and image, and explores the theoretical problems such as the nature, generation, type and function of the image theory of literature, so as to provide a new understanding and exploration of literature.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part, which consists of five chapters, respectively examines the mutual imitation, reference, communication and presence of language and image. This part presents the background, naming, concepts, categories and methods of the image theory of literature. Following the basic principle of the unity of history and logic, Zhao divides the language-image relationship into three sessions: “language-image unity,” “language-image split” and “language-image intertextuality.” The second part, which includes three chapters, examines generation of images in literature, the image theory of poetry and the illustration theory of fiction. Chapter VI “The Imagery Theory of Literature” draws forth the following two chapters, in which the specific and most representative literature-image genres are expounded.

Zhao’s scholarship is good at the detailed analysis of individual cases. To a considerable extent, it has the nature of “meta case,” which has enlightening significance for later studies. We have arrived at the last two chapters of Zhao’s argument, his study-examples: poetic paintings and the illustrations of Chinese fiction.

In Chapter VII, Zhao gives an adequate and very fine exposition of the history of poetic paintings and summarizes it into five modes: straightforward depiction, indirect portrayal, discourse reconstruction, vehicle Imaging and apperception-based classification. He suggests “the filling of the spaces of poems and the materialization of poetic images are the primary theoretical basis for poetic paintings as image rhetoric” (Zhao 211). At last, Zhao conducts a case study of *Illustration to the Second Prose Poem on the Red Cliff* by Qiao Zhongchang. He concludes that the connotative meanings coded by Qiao Zhongchang can be summarized in five modes: apparent movement, conveying one’s emotion and views, replacing the

angle of view, inventing things out of thin air and putting falsehood on a par with truth.

Chapter VIII traces the origins and developments of the illustrations of Chinese fiction. The illustrations of fiction in China are derived from “Li Pu Jiang Chang” (立铺讲唱) in the Tang Dynasty and Bianwen (变文), Bianxiang (变相) and the illustrations of Huaben (话本) are the earliest textualized remnant. Particularly noteworthy is the part in which Zhao compares and discusses the relative strengths and weaknesses of “image narrative” and “language narrative.” “[I]f these empirical descriptions are studied on the basis of the combination of history and logic, their theoretical nature and stringency will be highly enhanced and more meaningful issues will be brought up, especially the relationship between language narrative and image narrative and the difference between narrative illustrations and other literary images such as poetic paintings” (Zhao 231).

Zhao’s *Text–Image Theory* is an important book, exemplary in its integration of case studies, complex historical analysis, and broad theoretical speculation. Its contributions to discussions of Chinese traditional literature and arts and the relationship between text and image are sure to be longstanding.

The image theory of literature is a cross-cultural achievement in the global semiotics, which bridges Chinese and the West literary theory and has done a good job of updating literary semiotic scholarship. “The cross-cultural semiotics as the new type of interdisciplinary practice with respect to both western and nonwestern academic worlds becomes also a new academic ground for promoting scholarly dialogues between all kinds of disciplines” (Li, “Nonwestern Semiotics” 233).

In order to put forward Chinese scholar’s theory, it is very necessary to seriously study and learn from all the achievements of human civilization, which is also the basis of our original research. Chinese scholars urgently need to use modern theory to activate the rich theoretical resources contained in Chinese traditional literature and arts. On this basis, Chinese scholars could make a notable contribution to the global semiotics. This is Zhao’s Enlightenment to us.

### Works Cited

- Moran, Joe. *Interdisciplinarity*, New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Li, Youzheng. “Nonwestern Semiotics and Its Possible Impact on the Composition of Semiotics Theory in the Future.” *Semiotica* 187 (2011): 229-237.
- . “General Semiotics (GS) as the All-round Interdisciplinary Organizer: GS Versus Philosophical Fundamentalism.” *Semiotica* 208 (2016): 35-47.
- Kalelioğlu, Murat. *A Literary Semiotics Approach to the Semantic Universe of George Orwell’s*

Nineteen Eighty-Four. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019.

Zhao, Xianzhang. *Text–Image Theory: Comparative Semiotic Studies on Chinese Traditional Literature and Arts*, Roma: Aracne, 2021.

—. “Literature and Image Research: New Practical Learning in the New Era.” *Commentaries on Literature and Art* 1 (2022): 25-27.