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BOOK REVIEW

Towards a general theory of social culture: a review of Yiheng Zhao's *Semiotics: Principles & Problems* (3rd Edition)

Semiotics: principles & problems (3rd ed), Yiheng Zhao, Nanjing University Press, January 2016, ISBN: 978-7-305-16051-6

Semiotics has been an academic discipline for over 100 years. Many scholars, beginning with Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce, have developed their own concepts of the sign which have formed the different traditions or paradigms in the field of semiotics. "New semiotics" began to take shape at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is inter-disciplinary and global, focusing on the networks of meaning co-created by human beings and other intelligent life, and their significance to our universe. Yiheng Zhao's monograph *Semiotics: Principles & Problems* (3rd Edition, Nanjing University Press, 2016) is representative of this new trend.

Highlighted as "one of the most important books on semiotics in recent thirty years" (Rao, 2012), this book not only reviews the achievements of a century of global semiotics, it systematically expands semiotics into all fields of human science by updating its fundamental principles and by innovatively incorporating China's traditional semiotic heritage. Hence, this prize-winning book, originally published in 2012, has had three printings and continues to enjoy a high reputation among Chinese academics.

I. *Semiotics: Principles & Problems* and Zhao's formal-cultural theory

Semiotics: Principles & Problems is the first book of Zhao's "Trilogy of Meaning", his series on his Formal-Cultural theory. As a formalist scholar, Zhao has devoted his life to constructing a system of cultural formalism that can effectively analyse all types of social cultural problems. He began this theoretical exploration in the 1980s, when he first advanced his definition of culture: "the total set of meaningful activities in the society". In the 1990s, he published two preliminary works, *Semiotics of Literature* (1990) and *When Narrator is Narrated: Introduction to Comparative Narratology* (1998), and by the 2010s he had published more than 200 related papers. His mature Formal-Cultural theory is presented in his Trilogy of Meaning, which consists of *Semiotics: Principles & Problems* (2012), *A General Narratology* (2013) and *Philosophical Semiotics* (2017).

This trilogy, which has more than 1.2 million Chinese characters, can be regarded as a milestone in the academic history of both semiotics and critical theory. Over its more than 100-year history, critical theory has developed into an umbrella term that covers all of the theories about culture, literature, arts, culture, cultural politics, social criticism, and so on. Under this umbrella, Marxist cultural criticism, phenomenology-existentialism-hermeneutic, psychoanalysis and formalism, which appeared almost simultaneously but independently, have become the four major pillars of critical theory. They share the same aim: to understand the essence of various cultural and social phenomena.

Obviously, Zhao's theory belongs to the tradition of the fourth pillar, that is, formalism. However, his work is distinct from that of traditional formalists, who take structuralism or linguistic semiotics as the basis of their theories. Instead, he calls his theory "Formal-Cultural theory" or "Theories of Meaning", and he endeavours to expand formalism to embrace all

types of signifying activities; that is, any activity that carries or conveys meaning in a society. Consequently, his theory broadens the research objects of formalism beyond verbal signs to include the non-verbal signs carried by different types of media. According to Zhao, his theory aims “to comprehend social culture in terms of forms”. Hence, his theory is an interdisciplinary theoretical system that encompasses nearly all of the fields related to the term “meaning”, namely, semiotics, narratology, stylistics, rhetoric, philosophy of arts, media and communication studies, etc.

Given these aims, it is not difficult to understand why *Semiotics: Principles & Problems* is the first book of the trilogy. According to Zhao, a “sign is the perception that carries meaning” (Zhao, 2016, 1); therefore, semiotics is “the study of meaning” (2016, 2). As social culture is the total set of activities that convey meaning, semiotics becomes the fundamental theory of cultural studies. A clearer elaboration of the relations between meaning, semiotics and cultural studies can be found at the beginning of his book:

The problem of meaning, including its production, sending, communication, receiving, undemanding and variation etc., is the core issue of both humanities and social sciences. The fundamental goal of semiotics is to provide the basic methods for meaning studies, therefore it can be worked as the mutual framework shared by different disciplines devoted to studying cultural problems. In other words, different theories acquire their commensurability because of semiotics, no longer confined to its specialty. (Zhao, 2016, 22)

Building on this observation, he systematically summarises a series of semiotic principles for various types of semiosis with the aim of using these principles as the guiding theories not only for his trilogy, but also for cultural studies in general.

II. Reconstruction and renovation of semiotic principles

Semiotics: Principles & Problems, as its name implies, is composed of two main parts. The first part, constituted by the first 10 chapters of the book, is called “The Principles”. Zhao does much innovative work in this section by first revisiting some basic semiotic concepts and principles in the field of cultural studies and then recontextualising these principles based on his analysis of socio-cultural problems.

In the introductory chapter, Zhao redefines the concept of “sign”. He very clearly states on the first page of his book that “a sign is a perception that carries meaning. And meaning can only be conveyed by signs, so the purpose of a sign is to convey meaning” (2016, 1). As we know, the popular understanding of signs in semiotic studies is embodied in the Latin phrase *aliquid stat pro aliquo*, which presupposes that a sign must have materiality; that is, it is “something” that stands for another thing. However, some signs do not have such physical forms, for instance, “mental signs”. In addition, as Zhao points out, the “absence” of materiality (Zhao, 2016, 27–28) can also be interpreted as a sign, for the absence itself can carry meaning. For instance, a blank space in a picture, a pause in a piece of music, a blank expression on a face or even a lack of a response can be filled with meaning in specific situations. Accordingly, his understanding of a sign as a “perception” makes his definition much more precise than the traditional understanding of signs. For Zhao, a sign must have a vehicle to carry its meaning, but this vehicle may not have a physical form; it may be a perception waiting for the interpreter’s recognition and interpretation.

Peirce once suggested that “nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign” (CP 2.308), thereby shifting semiotics from a text-orientated to an interpretation-orientated paradigm. Zhao’s definition of signs shows that he is building on Peirce’s interpretative approach, dedicating himself to reconstructing a more open and dynamic system of semiotic theories. As mentioned above, a sign is essentially a perception. Specifically, anything that makes an

interpreter perceive that something carries meaning and needs to be interpreted can be regarded as a sign. Thus, it is the interpreter's interpretation, not the sign itself that makes a sign a sign. Consequently, it "is the potential that one sign can be interpreted by another sign, that is to say, interpretation is the realisation of meaning" (Zhao, 2016, 2). Hence, it is the sign-users' act of dynamic interpreting that bridges the "sign" and "meaning", an essential pair in Zhao's definition.

The openness and dynamism of Zhao's semiotic theory is manifested not only in his definition of a sign, but also in his explanation of the relation between "sign" and "thing". According to Zhao, the majority of the things we perceive are neither "pure signs" nor "pure things" (or a thing-in-itself). Most objects are a mix of sign and thing, which he names a "sign-thing" (Zhao, 2016, 27). However, the meaning of each sign-thing changes according to a specific interpreter's interpretation in a specific context. Thus, even a functional thing with few signifying factors can be "semiotised" (Zhao, 2016, 33) into a sign by the addition of meaning. Conversely, a pure sign without any practical functions in our daily life can be "desemiotised" (Zhao, 2016, 30); in this case, its signifying factors are reduced. These observations lead to one of the most important principles in Zhao's book: the interpreting of a sign-thing is always a bidirectional process that slides between the pure sign and the pure thing. (Zhao, 2016, 27-30).

The above principle is important, as it indicates that all semiosis exists in a changing state, and only the communication between the sign users in a specific context can determine its meaning. Zhao's intention is to apply this principle to the examination of human cultures. Thus, he examines human cultural history, and then concludes the following:

It is a historical principle that the signifying intensity of sign-things has been increased with the development of civilization. One of the most important features of contemporary culture is the "redundancy of signs", for nearly every sign-thing nowadays is sharply moving towards the end of pure signs. Most of the natural objects, irrelevant with human beings, nowadays become the "semi-artificiality". For instance, tourism almost semiotizes very types of nature; the signifying factors increase so much in each sign-thing that its practical function can be ignored. For instance, the brands weigh much more than commodity ... (Zhao, 2016, 32)

A sign is a perception that carries meaning, but it is not easy to understand how a sign carries meaning. This is another key issue in this book. Zhao proposes a new term, "co-text", to distinguish the relations among interpreter, text and social context. According to him, "co-text is the additional elements of the sign-text which will be sent to the receiver altogether with the latter". (2016, 139) These additional elements or co-texts, in most circumstances, are outside of the sign-text. It is necessary to study the functions of various co-texts, as they are to a large extent the social conventions that determine the way we interpret a sign-text. Many semioticians have discussed this problem using different terms, for instance, Julia Kristeva's "inter-textuality", Gerald Genette's "transtextual relations" and so on.

Zhao develops the previous studies by categorising the co-texts based on the way co-texts connect with sign-texts. Zhao divides the co-text into the following three major types and seven subtypes. (1) Explicit co-text consists of the additional elements that appear completely on the surface of the sign-text. It has two subtypes, para-text and archi-text. The former encompasses elements of the framework of the sign-text, for instance, a title, foreword, preface, illustration etc., and the latter denotes the cultural group that the sign-text belongs to, for instance, a genre, performer or time. (2) Generative co-text is created by the generative processes of a co-text. It also has two subtypes: pre-text, which is generated before the sign-text, and sychro-text, which is produced simultaneously with the sign-text. (3) Interpretive co-text consists of the elements produced after the sign-text. In another words, the interpretation of a text by a

cultural group can in turn affect the meaning production of the sign-text. There are three subtypes of interpretive co-text: meta-text, link-text and preceding or ensuing text. (2016, 140–148).

Kristeva's "intertextuality" belongs to Zhao's generative co-text type. Zhao further argues that interpretive co-text and explicit-text can influence the way we interpret signs. Thus, his set of co-texts extends the previous discussions of intertextuality, especially its relation with context. Zhao's goal is to construct a general semiotic theory that can cover all activities that have meaning, as is illustrated by his co-text theory. To this end, he puts forwards an innovative concept, "co-text obsession", to analyse the characteristics of sign-text interpreting in today's culture. As he says, "co-text can even take the place of the sign-text, turning out to be the dominant factor that strongly affects receiver's interpretation" (Zhao, 155). This is a sharp but accurate observation, and many cultural phenomena can be attributed to co-text obsession. Today's "fandom" or "fan culture" in the entertainment industry is a typical example. For instance, if fans focus on the archi-text, they will be fans of certain types of films or TV dramas; if they focus on link-text, they will watch all of the films with the same actor/actress. Hence, it is co-text obsession that has led to the current prevalence of fandom. This observation creates a brand new perspective from which to examine pop culture.

The above discussion illustrates that the first section of this book presents the unique features of Zhao's theoretical approach to semiotics. In his revisiting of the basic concepts of semiotics, he has not only incorporated different approaches – he has also proposed new ideas and developed a contemporary semiotic theory. As another example, when discussing Saussure's terms "paradigmatic" and "syntagmatic", Zhao first compares them with Roman Jakobson's corresponding terms "axis of selection" and "axis of combination", and then explains how Jakobson transfers the coordination of two axes into a stylistic analysis of the text. Building on this, he advances his own idea about the significance of the two axes in cultural studies: "pop culture and high culture represent two modes of textual construction, dominated by two axes, respectively" (2016, Zhao, 168).

He further develops the above idea in Chapter 17, holding that the controversy between "canonisation" and "decanonisation" in our post-modern society can be clarified by applying the perspective of the two axes. According to him, traditional canonisation, usually conducted by literary critics, compares and then selects the classics along the paradigmatic axis. However, this job is now being done by the mass readers or audience, who select classics along the syntagmatic axis, which defines classics according to popularity instead of quality. Consequently, the two canonisation processes produce two surrogate selves: the former fills textual identity into our personality-self, whereas the latter presents our symbolic self in the social cultural group. However, neither of these two selves can objectively justify their existence, as "the symbolic meaning added on those classics has been substituting for the real social relationships" (2016, 379). Hence, by using the theoretical foundation of semiotics to critique contemporary cultural crisis, "this book not merely reflects the author's profound insights of semiotics, but also shows his deep humanistic concerns" (Peng, 2013, 178)

This reconstruction and renovation of semiotic principles can also be found in Chapter 10, where Zhao breaks down the traditional view of the relations between meta-languages in linguistics and logics. Many scholars have agreed that different meta-languages cannot co-exist on the same level, hence the upper layer of meta-language always controls the lower layer. However, Zhao presents examples, for instance, the Necker Cube, the blurring between character and actor in movies, and the dialogues of Zen, that prove the coexistence of meta-languages in our culture, which he names the "vortex of interpretations". Furthermore, he develops this principle from deep cultural structure, and concludes that different meta-

languages at the upper layer can co-exist, and thus result in a “vortex of evaluation”, which is the dynamic of our human culture.

II. From semiotic principles to the semiotic problems of today

In the second part of his book (Chapter 10-18), “The Problems”, Zhao uses his revised semiotic principles to analyse cultural problems in contemporary society. Unlike other semioticians, Zhao moves beyond the development of a theoretical framework and tries to apply semiotics to the specific cultural phenomena that other disciplines or theories cannot clearly explain. This analytical process in return generates original theories. For instance, the study of art has a long history, and art has been defined from various perspectives such as functionalism, expressiveness, formalism and institutionalism. The twentieth century witnessed the rise of the Avant-Garde movement, which has continuously challenged these definitions, so there has been no agreed definition of art. Starting from this position, Zhao holds an “open concept” of the arts, maintaining that an unbound definition is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of art. To this end, he summarises three principles that redefine art from a semiotic perspective.

First, “art is an unnatural sign” (p. 297), which means that nothing, natural or artificial, can be regarded as art unless it is exhibited as art. This principle determines “exhibition” to be the first condition of art, as an “art exhibition launches the socio-cultural institution, places the work in the networks woven by the meaning of art, and then causes the sign-text to be regarded as that which carries art meaning” (p. 303). In the third book of his trilogy, *Philosophical Semiotics* (2017), Zhao develops “exhibition” into a general criterion to distinguish the specific type of cultural text: “only through exhibition can we decide the way we interpret the cultural text” (Zhao, 2017, 225). The second principle is the “Impracticality of Art”. As previously mentioned, every sign is essentially a compound of a sign and a thing, mixing practical and impractical meanings. However, art is a special type of thing-sign, whose meaning must be largely impractical. In other words, art’s signifying mechanism ensures that art has few practical functions and more or even only signifying functions. The third principle is “Skipping the Object in Art Semiosis”. It means that in the sign-object-interpretant triad, an art sign always skips the object and directly refers to its interpretant, which is a function of its distance from any practical purpose. According to this definition, it is not difficult to classify Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* as art. Exhibiting the urinal in a gallery separates it from its original function and makes it a piece of art. Only this premise allows beholders to understand the interpretation of art – to jump over its functionality (object) and to focus on its artistic value (interpretant).

Moving beyond art, the strong explanatory power of Zhao’s semiotics is demonstrated in his discussion of more complicated cultural problems, such as “cultural markedness”. When discussing the models of markedness in linguistics, Zhao argues that “markedness is ubiquitous in each culture, however its reason does not consist in the morphology but in the pragmatics” (2016, 278). Hence, instead of using the traditional dualistic model – marked and unmarked – he uses a triadic model – positive, middle and alien item – to extend this linguistic concept to cultural studies. According to him, the middle item is pressed by both ends in the dynamic relations of three items. The pressure from the positive on the middle item, mainly dependent on the cultural tolerance, is propelled by the need to maintain its position. The pressure from the alien on the middle item, meanwhile, originates from the subculture’s claim to self-overturn. By this way, the complex interactions among the three items determine the trends of cultural developments.

This original insight into the mechanism of cultural development is inspiring, for it deepens our understanding of the global structure and movement of culture. Hence, cultural

markedness can also be applied to explain the historical exchange between cultures: “the cultural markedness resulting from dissymmetry in the duality of the cultural categories, can be changed with cultural development. Therefore, the development of culture is the historical change of markedness” (Zhao, 2016, 282). The history of dressing up might be a good example to explain the dynamic role of markedness in human culture. Historically, the male gender was the marked term, and therefore males needed to dress up. Females did not dress up for much of history, as they were the middle term, influenced by the positive, so they did not have the pressure of being marked. However, in contemporary society, this model of markedness has been reversed so that female is marked by both the middle and positive terms, hence females must dress up.

Cultural markedness has ethnic significance, as the dominant value of our society is determined by the middle term’s relations with the positive and alien terms. The “semioethics” trend in the twenty-first century is based on our awareness of human beings as “semiotic animals”. It pushes semiotics to focus on “the human capacity for responsibility for life over the entire planet”, as “the question of responsibility cannot be escaped at the most radical level” (Petrilli, 2009). Zhao’s semiotic cultural analysis fully demonstrates his awareness of his ethical responsibilities as a semiotician. In addition to his discussion of cultural markedness, he questions our moral values and social responsibilities under various cultural phenomena in many chapters. For instance, in Chapter 17 he summarises the four symptoms of the semiotic crisis caused by the redundancy of signs in current society as follows: (1) signs represented by mass media, especially by advertisements, do not refer to the desires of human beings, but to our “desire of desire” to pursue the added value of vanity; (2) the prevalence of entertainment prevents us from seeking the meaning of signs; (3) the temporal and spatial distance of semiosis is disappearing because of the development of media technologies, hence the traditional relation between the presence and absence of meaning has been reversed; and (4) the superabundance of signs has resulted in the “paradox of choices”, making consumers lose selective ability in their everyday life (Zhao, 2016, 362–369).

Zhao continues to analyse the socio-cultural roots of this semiotic crisis and concludes that our society has passed the stages of “alienated labour” and “alienated consumption” and is now in the stage of “alienated semiotic consumption” (Zhao, 2016, 373). This is the result of the over-dependence of signs in contemporary production and consumption. “The consumption of a commodity cannot satisfy the need of economic development” (2016, 374), because it has peaked in today’s market. Hence, the added values of the commodity, namely, its brand, its appeals to consumers’ social identity or status or even its reference to consumers’ vanity, which are the signs of the commodity that have replaced the commodity itself, are now the major factor in economic growth.

In the last chapter of the book, the author further demonstrates how semiotics can be applied to elaborate fundamental cultural mechanisms from the historical perspective. Building on the “vortex of evaluation” principle summarised above, he first analyses the “driving and breaking forces” of modernity in Western society, which are “traditionalism” and “capitalism” according to Max Weber, and concludes that the co-existence of the two contradictory meta-languages plays a significant role in historical exchange, as it is the impetus of modernity. Then, he reflects on the two major ways that Chinese culture has dealt with Western cultures in the process of modernisation and points out that it is not a wise choice to either totally receive or refuse Western culture. Thus, he criticises the totality of the meta-language of new Confucianism today, as “every nation, if it can receive dynamic metalanguage, can also find its restraint metalanguage from the people’s own national belief” (Zhao, 2016, 394). This is the historic function of the vortex of evaluation.


The twenty-first century currently experiences a boom in semiotic studies. Scholars around the world today devote themselves to renewing semiotics from various perspectives. However, few of them can transcend Saussurean, Peircean and other classical paradigms to innovate with their own theoretical systems. In this regard, Zhao's book should be regarded as a pioneer in the age of new semiotics, because it is, so far, the first monograph that refines "signs" and "semiotics", and thereby reconstructs semiotics at the root. Hence, this book is highly recommended for the following reasons. Firstly, it provides with us the clearest account of why and how the major semiotic concepts and principles should be refined. It is the new definition of sign, a perception that carries meaning, determines the paradigm shift of semiotics, which is the study of meaningful activities in culture. Consequently, a set of new methods and perspectives are put forward in this book, systematically expanding semiotics as the fundamental theory of socio-cultural studies. Secondly, Zhao's reconstructive approach is not only theoretical, but also practical and applicable. This book illustrates vivid cases, from ancient time to the present, and from western to eastern societies, proving that semiotics is probably the best way to solve the cultural problems in our global society. Therefore, it is also potential readable for the general public. Thirdly, this book not only combines semiotics with ancient Chinese philosophical heritages, but also extends it to many other interdisciplinary fields, such as media studies, narratology, arts, history, sociology, psychoanalysis, cognitive science etc. Those multiple and open dialogues can be found on nearly every page, largely broadening the boundary of semiotics. Hence, this is a groundbreaking book, which will certainly receive more and more international readers, for its uniqueness and irreplaceability in global semiotic studies today.

Notes on contributor

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