

Possible Worlds Narrative in Cyber Time^{*}

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Abstract: In the postmodern context, the traditional narrative of “1 text—1 world—1 story” has been deconstructed into “many texts—many worlds—many stories”. Kai-cheung Dung constructs an encyclopaedic novel of cyber time in his *Natural History Trilogy*, which alternates between what is, what ought to be and the probable. He uses a combination of Realism, Romanticism and metafiction to create a Third Space Heterotopian narrative and experiments with metalepsis and interactive narratives in the many storyworlds in the text.

Keywords: what is, what ought to be and the probable, Third Space, three-world narrative

赛博时代的可能世界叙事

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摘要: 传统小说多采取“一文本—世界—故事”叙事法，而后现代小说则多建构“多文本多世界多故事”叙事法。董启章的“自然三部曲”开创实然、或然、应然三重奏的多层故事；打造赛博时代的百科全书小说；融合现实主义、浪漫主义、后设小说等叙事法，营造异托邦式第三空间叙事，并开拓多重世界的错层互动叙事。

关键词: 或然、实然及应然，第三空间，三重奏叙事

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There is more than one world in the universe. Similarly, fiction can contain three worlds: “what is”, “what ought to be” and “the probable”. The world of “what is”, as the name suggests, is the world of realities. “The probable” is the world of probabilities and imagination. Finally, the world of “what ought to be” is the perfect poetic dwelling. If “what is” is a one-dimensional world, and “what ought to be” creates a second dimension, “the probable” makes the world three-dimensional or multi-dimensional. The traditional “1 text—1 world—1 story” (Ryan, 2013) narrative is transformed in Dung’s work into “many texts—many worlds—many stories”. The Kantian concept of the “noumenon” or the “thing-in-itself” is multiplied in his *Natural History Trilogy* to create a postclassical narratology (Dan & Liva, 2010) that combines the three worlds. The first volume, *Tiangong Kaiwu: Xuxu Ruzhen* [*Works and Creation: Vivid and Lifelike*] (Dung, 2005) is written in two voices. The second volume, *Shijian Fanshi: Yaci zhi Guang* [*Histories of Time: The Lustre of Mute Porcelain*] (2007), has three voices. The third, *Wuzhong Yuanshi: Beibei Chongsheng* [*The Origin of Species: Beibei is Reborn*] has four. The latter is divided into *Xuexi Niandai* [*The Apprenticeship*] (2010) and *The Overture: Meide* [*The Virtues*] (2014), suggesting a sequel could be announced at any time. This trilogy, with a total of more than one million words written in more than 10 years, presents readers with three worlds: the “what is”, the “probable” and the “what ought to be”. Dung was named Hong Kong Writer of the Year in 2014, joining the company of such renowned writers as Liu Yichang, Xixi, Yesi (Liang Bingjun) and Chen Guanzhong. This article considers how he links city space with cyber space and constructs a three-world narrative.

I . “The Probable” and Virtual Space Narrative

Tiangong Kaiwu: Xuxu Ruzhen [*Works and Creation: Vivid and Lifelike*] is written in two voices, each consisting of 12 chapters. The first voice, marked by Arabic numerals, tells “the probable” and the second, marked by Roman numerals, tells “what is”. With an ingeniously designed spatial-temporal structure, the two alternating voices invigorate the intricate

and complex relationships between the worlds of “the probable”, “what is” and “what ought to be”. This first book focuses more on “what is”—specifically, it presents the history of a century of technological creations of the fictional city of V, an avatar of Hong Kong. The books present the history of three generations of one family, the individuals and the city itself. Obviously representing the social history of Hong Kong over a hundred years, these accounts construct modernity and postmodernity in the age of objectification. So why does “the probable” precede “what is” in this book?

An often overlook detail that the end of the first voice’s Chapter 11 is actually crucial: as one of the “characters” who is written into being by the author, Xuxu finds herself facing the punishment of being “unplugged” by the police and the doctor for violating the “rules of characters”, which really are the “rules of narration”. The police have previously warned her that if she is not a “character”, she could face the highest punishment of deportation, as they cannot imprison or execute a real human being. In a sense, Xuxu is like a robot or a cyborg, the latter being a hybrid of a machine and a living organism. The lines between human beings and machines, nature and artificiality are very often blurred (Hu & Zhao, 2012, p. 175). To determine whether Xuxu is really a human being, Turing Test in computer science is useful, which measures a computer’s thinking ability by the degree of its reaction. In contrast, a computer would display its own character and have its own personality. Dung’s examination of the difference between real and fictional characters has the same aims as the Turing Test, but applies the opposite operation (Huang, 2009, pp. 110, 139).

Xuxu, a key symbol in “the probable” world, accommodates all imagination. Unlike a conventional “character”, she bears certain features that are characteristic of scientific fiction, and manifest the writer’s intention to create a narrative of “the probable” in cyber time. In the book, the “characters” world is a computer and biochemical world, one that projects new virtual images. Xuxu is imagination itself, representing all the possibilities in the world of “the probable”, testifying to the writer’s ambition to construct “the probable” narrative. In the preface, he claims that his aim is “to build a possible world and present all possible imagination in the diverse

dimensions". "The probable" is in fact the disnarrated, which is defined by Prince (1988) as elements of the past, present and future that are narrated in the story but do not actually occur in the story. Thus, Dung constructs whole new world views and redefines the spatial-temporal totality of fiction.

Xuxu also symbolizes the originality of the rules of narration. In a longitudinally aggregated reading, the first voice tells how "I" creates a fictional narrative by means of the imaginary "Word Factory". The very first idea is stunning: Xuxu was born a 17-year-old and remains so forever. The novel uses metanarrative to expose how the narrator conjured Xuxu from a lingering memory of Ruzhen, his former lover. A simulated world is then created through collage and montage: Xiaodong and the police officer both have pen—hands; Axe has scissor hands like the character in the film *Edward Scissorhands*; and Johnny is a watchman, who guides the characters in reforming the society. These "characters" have their own self-consciousness and imagination, and are capable of questioning and reflecting on their fate. They force their creator to change his initial ideas and grant "the objects" the legitimacy of conscious beings. As explored in films such as *The Matrix* or *Blade Runner*, where the "replicants" demands rights from their makers, manipulation often comes with anti-manipulation, objects can subvert human intentions and machines may usurp the human world—the Sword of Damocles of technological advances. The society of "characters" is a reflection of the extended, recursive and reproduced human society.

The character building in the novel vividly illustrates the rules of fictional narration. First, unlike real human beings, "the characters" are manipulated by the narrative discourse. Second, "the characters" have their own personalities, which are derived from their settings. Their personalities, therefore, become their limitations. What is human cannot be separated from is object. The imagination of the "characters" creates reality—they are imagination itself. The narrative is thus a tug-of-war between the imagined world and the real world; a balancing game between the realistic, the rational and the irrational. Breaking conventions, Dung goes to an even stranger place, seeking the implicit "rosebud of words".

Dung's vision of "the probable" is related to classical Chinese "mythical

stories”, which usually record exotic lands, weird events, fairies, witchcraft and uncanny, supernatural or odd tales. Some examples are *Shan Hai Jing* [*Book of the Mountains and the Seas*], *Bowu Zhi* [*Records of Nature*], *Soushen ji* [*Stories of Immortals*], and *Liaozhai Zhiyi* [*Strange Tales of a Lonely Studio*]. In his early work, *Xiaodong Xiaoyuan* [*Xiaodong's Campus*] (1995), Dung uses metaphors of animals and plants to make critical observations of the human world. For example, a rat dances for a piano—playing maiden, there is a forest in a library and a swarm of ants surrounds a gluttonous headmaster. In *Bowu Zhi* [*Records of Nature*] (2012), the strange stories in the city of V are divided into “strange places”, “strange characters”, “strange objects”, “strange things” and “private things”, and humans and objects grow in empathy for each other. For instance, the dangling aerial root of a plant symbolizes the tears of a maiden. Dung’s vision of “the probable” is even stranger than Li Bihua’s imagination, which is rooted in traditional culture, especially the ideas of reincarnation, immortality or karma, although Dung retains an essential connection to classical Chinese mythologies. Dung’s work is more postmodern in its use of virtual time, and uses metanarratives to expose its own fictional nature.

Human cognition of imagination and “the probable” is always changing and evolving. Aristotle held that a subject that was believable yet unlikely to happen could achieve better poetic effect than a subject that was likely to happen, but not believable. Big data is useful for statistics, documentation and obtaining distributions; it may be powerful in demographic research, astronomical observations, statistical analyses, stylistic or discourse analysis, or even in prediction and futurology, but has only limited ability to calculate “the probable”. In contrast, literary imagination can encompass unlimited possibilities.

Things change dramatically every day, and the way people imagine “the probable” changes as well. If classical Chinese mythic fictions feature imagined relationships between humans and gods, and contemporary Chinese vernacular fictions feature relationships between humans themselves, postmodern fictions are about the relationships between humans and objects, the struggle between humans and machines, and the convenience, temptations and dangers of

objects. Historical fictions that explore “the probable” are motivated by hypothetical questions: What if dinosaurs were still here? What if the American War of Independence had never happened? When such an “if” is applied, history becomes “counterfactual history”. Asimov proposed three ideas for science fiction: what if... in the beginning?; what if...?; and what if... continued (Zhan, 2003). Baudrillard argued that things like online games or 3D films encourage people to generate pleasure from virtual reality by constructing a society of hyperreality, simulation and simulacra. Hyperreality is more real than reality. Simulation is the replacement of reality through duplication and imitation. The surreal is obviously false and opposite to reality (Luo, 2002). Dung seeks to combine hyperreality, simulation and surreality in the probable world, and construct a whole new narrative that incorporates philosophy, physics and literature.

II .Infiltrating “The Probable ” into the History of Objects in “What Is ”

The originality of *Tiangong Kaiwu: Xuxu Ruzhen* [*Works and Creation: Vivid and Lifelike*] is the alternating narratives of “the probable” and “what is”; that is, between what has not happened and what has happened. In the narration of “what is”, there is also an original idea: the history of objects in V. The chapters narrated by the second voice have very intriguing titles: “radio, telegraph, telephone, lathe, sewing machine, TV set”. The 13 items in these chapters are centres of the narratives instead of any human characters. These industrial products outline the history of objects in V, but a closer study shows they are an examination of a hundred years of history of Hong Kong.

So why did Dung select these particular 13 items? First, they are objectifications of three generations of the focal family. The grandfather, Dung Fu, is fascinated by the ancient world described in the original work of *Tiangong Kaiwu* [*The Exploitation of the Works of Nature, 1637*] and is fond of radio waves, radio, telegraphs, telephones, etc. Dung Xi, the father, is crazy about the industrial world presented in the book *Wanwu Yuanli Tujian* [*An Illustrated Book of the Principles of All Things*], and obsessed with

things like lathes and sewing machines. He seeks fervently to prove his worth as a mechanic and projects the image of a firm, morally integrated man. The third generation, “I”, dreams of working in the humanities rather than in technological fields, and is passionate about books, such as *An Illustrated English—Chinese Dictionary* and *Instant Magic Tricks*. “I” prefer to calculate and weigh words in “my” writing every day and explore the possibilities for individuals and society.

Second, all the 13 items are human-made, representing the development of the 20th century technology, and illustrating the symbiotic relationship between humans, modern industry and the age of consumption. Technology advanced from the roaring of lathes and the flowing of liquid steel to the flow of data in the form of electronic pulses. Humans operate machines by controlling software. Thus, the book moves from objects for hearing, touching, and watching, to those for exercising, and then back to the first types, completing a cycle. Significantly, these objects are mostly masculine, hinting at power and heat and resonating with the more feminine objects highlighted in the first voice narration. There are no kitchen appliances, such as washing machines, blenders or refrigerators, or direct descriptions of digital gadgets or robots. This could be revealing of the writer’s deep consciousness.

The second voice of the novel appears to narrate only “what is”—these relationship between objects, humans and the city—but there are still elements of “the probable”. In the scientific, objective narration, the narrator makes frequent appearances and reminds the readers that the letters to Xuxu are purely fictional. The third generation takes literary pleasure in prying into everything from objects, to humans, to fetishes, and are always ready to explore the possible multi-levels of more “probabilities” for the world of “what is”. Below are three examples.

First, the TV set is a medium for probing into the possibilities of reality and virtuality. The first television station in V spawned three generations of TV watchers. In TV, “I” saw the other “me”, who was never really born, but nevertheless quietly judged the self. The TV—watching “I” is the reality, overfed and spoiled by TV, with a crooked and degenerated backbone. The TV set was more like a messenger from the world of “the probable” than a

reflection of the objective world of “what is”.

In a second example, cars are used to perceive and analyse the possibilities of multiple dimensions. The carless high school boy who had a crush on the girl in a Volvo later bought his own car—an insignificant Mini. As a grownup, he was clumsy with his new car and finally gave up car—driving altogether after a car accident. Approaching cars and avoiding them are two possible worlds. In one world, the upright “I” finally ended 30 years of negative attitudes towards cars and settles into the car driven by Lianxian, his wife. In another world, the distorted “I” was unable to drive due to a spinal disease. Yaci (mute porcelain), his wife in this world, who has not spoken to him much since their daughter Hua (flower) went missing over ten years ago, drives their son Guo (fruit) to school every day. The predictive narration indicates that the possible world of the distorted “me” will be the main storyworld of the second book. The present world and the future world are parallel, generating two possibilities like a split personality. The possible world is stretched into the future time and space of the imagination.

Finally, the camera is another tool to investigate the multiple dimensions of the imagination. Posing and gazing for photos produces immense possibilities for creativity, and therefore for the imagination. The point of a photo is not what to see, but what to think. In the book, the narrator found relief from the guilt of looking at pornographic pictures in the portrait of St. Mary. Then, accidentally stunned by the beauty of a girl in the church for Mass, he imagined the girl to be the embodiment of St. Mary. By pouring his heart out to the girl, the lover boy unexpectedly became a litterateur. But the photos he took of her were ambiguous: indifferent, yet yearning; bored, yet surprised; taunting, yet encouraging. The narrator studies the connection between photography and literature: which is more valuable, the reproduction of decisive moments or the exploration of the nature of human beings and their society? To reproduce with artifice, or with a natural approach? The impact of photos comes not from the puncta, but from the stadia, e. g. the details that touch something deep inside the observer’s memory, which indicates the fissures and multiplicity of photos. As Roland Barthes proposed in *La Chambre Clair*, realistic photos failed to capture the essential spirit of a

person, which came from years of emotional penetration and epiphany, something perceived only with one's mind, not one's eyes (1980/2003, pp. 39–45). A true image is similar to the idea of “aura” by Benjamin. The essence of classical arts is lost completely in the mechanic age where everything can be duplicated. In fact, black-and-white photos ignite the imagination more than colour photos. It is more expressed without a smile than with a smile, more in poetry than in images. Less words evoke more imagination. What is absent is richer than what is present. And that is precisely the power of imagination.

Even within the cold, objective and technological world of “what is”, Dung attaches to his narration multiple possibilities of direction, incorporating “the probable” into “what is”, to free the mind from the shackles of “logical precision”. The book leaps from one thought to another, with more examples than this paper can discuss. Despite this richness, the author of this paper would advise readers to be careful not to lose sight of the whole picture while pursuing details.

III . Trio Space Created by Dual Voices

The spatial-temporal narrative structure of *Tiangong Kaiwu: Xuxu Ruzhen* [*Works and Creation: Vivid and Lifelike*] is much like a trio. There is a world of “what is”, e. g. the world of science and objects, which is revealed through a realistic narration of how all things begin. There is “the probable” world of simulation and simulacra, which is revealed in a narration of the imagination that has no beginning or end. Multiple narrative voices of “the probable”, “what is” and “what ought to be” are interlaced with each other, presenting multiple scenarios and storylines, as is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Integrity and Separation, Reality and Imagination (Preface of the Dictator)

Voice 1. “The Probable”		Voice 2. “What Is”		Combination of the Two Voices
Chapter	Title	Chapter	Title	Imagination of “The Probable” by the Writer and Readers
1	Mushrooms and the Birth of the “characters”	I	Radio	Radio waves of life born out of nihilism or construction

Continued

Voice 1. "The Probable"		Voice 2. "What Is"		Combination of the Two Voices
Chapter	Title	Chapter	Title	Imagination of "The Probable" by the Writer and Readers
2	Butterfly Cookies and Ears	II	Telephone and Telegraph	Possibility of communication between the natural and artificial
3	Angel Hair and Rules of the "Characters"	III	Lathe	"The probable" rules of the "characters" and of the machines
4	Guitar Strings and Personality	IV	Sewing Machine	Possible personalities and fates of the real humans and "characters"
5	Marshmallow and Dream	V	Television	Reality and virtual mirror images as psychedelic as marshmallows and dreams
6	Cactus and the History of Life	VI	Cars	Possible routes by car, by bike or on foot
7	Screw Caps and Sex	VII	Games Console	The game—like quality of "Word Factory", "reproduction factory" and "workshop factory"
8	Pearls and Redemption	VIII	Watch	Convergence of time and the possible world of love affairs
9	Music Box and the True Self	IX	Typewriter	Searching for one's true self and poetics in "the probable"
10	The Real World	X	Camera	Possibility of seeking and preserving a beautiful spiritual legacy
11	The Imaginary World	XI	Cassette Recorder	Possible or impossible crossovers between "the probable" and "what is"
12	The Possible World	XII	Books (Symbolic)	Ensuing new possibilities after the collision of "the probable" and "what is"

A transversely aggregated reading of the two voices reveals new insights. For instance, the two Chapter Ones of the two voices, "Mushrooms and Birth of the 'characters'" and "Radio", give parallel narrations of the origins of the worlds of "the probable" and "what is". In "the probable", Xuxu was born 17

years old and remained so. In the “what is”, Ruzhen immigrated from Shanghai to Hong Kong. There are hints about her life in both cities. Also worth noting is the romance of her grandparents, which began with radio waves. Dung Fu was practicing the Morse code when he accidentally discovered the 17-year-old girl Long Jinyu, who apparently could read the code and record them with a twig, as if she had vacuum tubes in her ears. Love “in the air” was thus cemented and the headset was put on, symbolic of the rings that held them together. The age 17 is an important number, for the two girls in “the probable” and “what is” are 17 years old. So the book begins with life budding and is constructed from nihilism. In the real world, love between the grandparents leads to marriage, whereas the love of “me” for Ruzhen fails. But in “the probable” world, the narrator can manipulate Xuxu, the representation of the imagination.

Hearing is a major aspect of the book. A transverse reading of the two second chapters highlights hearing and communication. In “the probable” world there is the music box. Characters have acute senses of hearing and touching, and Xuxu uses butterfly cookies for ears in an effort to integrate into society. In the world of “what is”, the grandparents listened to the radio, parents were obsessed with the roar of the lathe, and “I” blocked out the noise of riots with headphones. After Long Jinyu died of disease at the age of 24 amid the turmoil of war, Dung Fu turned quiet and secluded himself. The natural connection of the mind and soul is far stronger than the communication through machines, for the former is based on emotion, whereas the latter is merely utilitarian. Eventually all of the males in the Dung family retreated into silence, actively shut themselves inside walls. These “invisible walls” imply self-establishment and self-completion, but also isolation and desolation, which are often unknowingly converted into each other. They are instruments for presenting the characters’ soul-wrenching experiences. In the chapter “The Cassette Recorder”, “I” befriended the witty and vivacious Xian because of their mutual love for George Lam’s music. After some years, “I” learned that Xian had had a failed relationship with a deaf and mute girl. Subsequently, he married and had a mentally-disabled daughter. Xian was associated with the existence of “invisible walls”. “My” lover, Ruzhen, who

was fond of classical music and opera, had an extremely acute sense of hearing. She remembered every little sound when ‘we’ were together. When their love failed, “I” tried to reconnect the breaches with the recording, only to get an echo from the “invisible walls”. This is the moment when the narrator finally sees the connection between the two incidents: Xian also had “invisible walls” when he said goodbye to “me” with the lonesome monologue he had recorded after their college exams. It was only long afterwards when the “walls” faded away that “I” came to understand Xian and Ruzhen and found peace and harmony in his heart. “I” can only make the “invisible walls” disappear and dissolve the feeling of guilt by rewriting the story of “me” and Ruzhen into the imaginary story of Xiaodong and Xuxu in the “Word Factory”. It is in “the probable” that the narrator understands that imperfection poses limitations on life and one must have the courage and positivity to live with these limitations. The world of “what is” starts with radio waves, with the love affair of an older generation that grew from radio waves, and ends with a cassette recorder, and with a love that is lost as the cassette malfunctions. Somewhere in the middle, there are also the telephone and telegraph. So audio media are written in the world of “what is” alongside the visual media such as the TV, camera and video game console. The synaesthesia of narration is presented in the novel from a cross-media perspective.

A contrastive reading of “the probable” and “what is” reveals another truth. The world of “characters”, while appearing tender and caring, can also be cruel and irrational. Machines with ruthless edges, although instruments of violence, can show softness and poetics. The symbol for “characters” has multiple implications. It can be a character in the novel, or an extraordinary human being, or the idea that humans become attached to objects and become useless. Technology benefits human advancement but it is also subject to questioning and reflection. The latest simulated video gaming provides more complex possibilities for powerful manipulation, but it also may turn humans into soulless gamers. Human beings become objects, puppets without the ability to think critically. Baudrillard thinks that cancerous objects, which are neither animals nor plants, somehow resemble the tropical jungle. When

consumption is the ethics of the era, and all everyday dealings are about receiving and controlling wealth, humans become merely sensual beings. In the materialistic age, every day is carnival, yet true festivity is nowhere to find. Technological advances and moral degeneration co-exist in the world of “what is” and this industrial civilization kills imagination, while the world of “the probable” keeps its poetic innocence and ecstatic beauty. The only redemption from the cancer is the imagination mode of the “Word Factor”, where everything non-structural, e. g. the incessantly accumulated and inflated objects, are stripped off, and the music and books of peers, ancestors, and posterity are restructured. Only by separating from objects can one create the ideal world of “what ought to be”.

Most Hong Kong writers focus their work on urban spaces, which, however subtle and profound their work is in terms of depth and intensity, tends to limit their outlook. Dung’s creation of a trio of spaces, “the probable”, “what is” and “what ought to be”, ushers in a horizon of immense possibilities, that probes the relationships between true and false, accidental and apodictic, possible and impossible propositions. The objectified world and the simulated world overlap. Parts and wholes are refracted, chemically combined to generate new meanings. Fantasies become “the probable” of the “what is”. In his discussion of a Third Space, Edward W. Soja defines the First Space as real physical space, which is purely materialist. The Second Space, which is subjective and spiritual, concerns the mind and ideas. In the Third Space, “everything comes together [...] subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history” (1996/2005, pp. 12–16, 67–108). Similarly, Foucault’s theory of Heterotopias elaborates on the real spaces that have layers of meaning or relationships to others, reflective of and resistant to society, deviant from while penetrating regular spaces, isolated yet pervasive. *Feitan [The Flying Carpet]*, by Hong Kong writer Xixi, is a representation of such Heterotopias, and it defies the monistic linear history of philosophy. Dung converts the inclination of traditional literature towards

historical accuracy by creating “the probable”, his own “third space”. Thus, in his *Heterotopias*, one can find a character who is “a Marxist and a post-Marxist, a materialist and an idealist, a structuralist and a humanist, bound by his discipline and interdisciplinary” (Soja, 1996/2005, pp. 12–16, 67–108).

The different voices in Dung’s work are not formed in the shape of a banyan tree, or the morning glory, nor a trapezoid, but as a trio, a polygon prism or a kaleidoscope. Realism, romanticism and surrealism are combined to construct a whole new atlas of “the probable”, “what is” and “what ought to be”. Calvino constructs worlds of “the probable”, where people live in trees and consist of “good” and “evil” halves, where one can accidentally cross fate and where the city has infinite possibilities. Similarly, Dung finds infinite space and time in his narration, excellently reproducing Proust’s capture of time. He uses synchronized and counterpoint narration, just as in *Xixi* or Llosa’s expanded sense of space and dimensions with Cubist narrations.

The first book of the *Natural History Trilogy* challenges the first, second and third dimension, whereas the next two books challenge linear time, integrating the past, present and future. Hong Kong writers love to examine the history of the 20th century, but Dung goes one further—or rather two. The second and third books extend the view of Hong Kong to the next 100 years, taking future narratorial authority. *Shijian Fanshi: Yaci zhi Guang* [*Histories of Time: The Lustre of Mute Porcelain*] goes beyond the history of V and presents a possible multi-tense world. Each chapter consists of three voices. The first voice is the voice of the present, when the hybrid girl Virginia interviews the dictator/writer and reveals his history. The dying marriage between the dictator and his wife, Yaci, is rescued. The second voice is the dimension of “the probable”, in which the dictator writes 24 letters to En’en (Grace) to discuss “baby universe” and predict her future. En’en then finds the predictions to be true and her life is invaded by fiction. A space tunnel like the wormhole proposed by Hawking opens, and the future and present overlap. The third voice is the voice of the future. In 2022, Yaci and the dictator drive the car into a pond. Hua, one of the twin sons, is long gone, leaving Guo as the only child. The time jumps to 2047. Guo, now a father, installs a mechanic heart into his daughter, Virginia, who remains 17 years old

and waits for the young Hua to travel through 50 years to meet her. The meeting is the moment when the past, present and future collide—all the energy gathers and all possibilities are available.

Dong coined the term “the infant universe” as a name for the virtual world he has been working to construct throughout his entire career. As a writer, he started out with reflections on gender. In *Androgyny: Evolution of a Non-Existent Species* (1994), he explores the possible world of androgyny through a female monologue. *Shuang Sheng* [*Double Body*] (1995) studies how men could turn into women. After this, he turned to school life, with such works as *Jinian Ce* [*The Yearbook*] (1995), *Xiaodong de Xiaoyuan* [*Xiaodong's Campus*] (1995), and *Jiake Ce* [*Homework List*] (1996), which use objects as metaphors. The books are narrated by school reports and stationary. Later, his interest shifted to the examination of cities. *Ditu Ji* [*Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*] (1997) features a spatial narrative (Ling, 2009). *The Rise and Prosperity of V* (1998) reviews the history of Hong Kong's folk culture and customs. The names in his works are consistent: Xuxu, Beibei, Xiaodong, V city, and these works obviously belong to the same virtual world. In 2005, Dong adapted his works into a stage play *Xiaodong's Campus and The Forest Dream*. He divided the play into two tracks, one consisting of ten realistic scenes, and the other one of four fantasies. 2005 was also the year when he launched the project of *Tiangong Kaiwu: Xuxu Ruzhen*, a project in which his ideas about a possible world were finally consolidated, accommodating issues of object narration, androgyny, gender and survival, atlases and folk customs, Hong Kong history, simulation of literary genres and rules of narration. Of course, there is also the creative instruction of children's magic story writing in *Beibei de Wenzhi Maoxian* [*Beibei's Adventure with Words*] and the interactive of graphics and words in the narration of *Duijiao Yishu* [*The Diagonal Art*] (2005). *Shijian Fanshi: Yaci zhi Guang* [*Histories of Time: The Lustre of Mute Porcelain*] creates three parallel worlds: the writer embodied by the dictator, the narrator and narrative consciousness embodied by Yaci and Enen, and the chorus and contention between the dictator and the co-writer, Virginia. In counterpoint, the three parts construct a whole “baby universe”, which, beyond just one city

and one history, points to a modal history, the all-inclusive history of nature and the integrated history of the lives before and after this one.

IV . Metalepsis and Interactive Narration of Multiple Worlds

Chatman uses a communicative model from semiology to illustrate traditional narration and communication, as shown in Figure 1 below. However, this one-way linear communication model is outdated. Postmodern narratology advocates breaking through the three levels to create an interactive art. Creators prescribe the rules and provide the meta works. Receivers participate in rewriting and re-creating new works. What is more, metalepsis (Ryan, 2013) means that characters from different levels can move between stages and interact with each other. Traditional frame narratives start from the primary actual world, and the embedded narratives occur in different worlds. An example is *The Arabian Nights*. With metalepsis, the story provides readers with narratives of multiple worlds, allowing them to infiltrate each other, affecting each other's stories while creating an ontological paradox and making the impossible possible. For example, in Julio Cortázar's story, *Continuidad de los parques*, readers are murdered by the character in the story, and this is supported with photographic evidence.

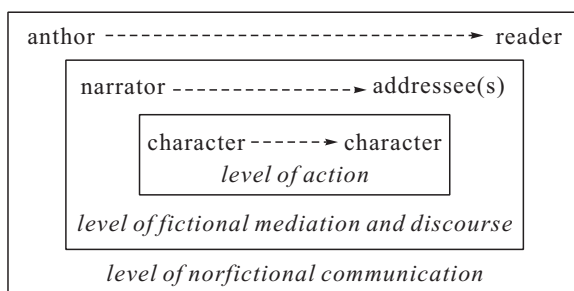


Figure 1 Communicative Model of Narration

Narrative metalepsis and interaction are rather complex. On the intradiegetic level, Xiaodong creates Xuxu in “the probable” world and the ideal world of “what ought to be”. At the middle level, “I” creates “the probable” world of Xiaodong and world of objects that is “what is”. On the extradiegetic level, the real writer and implied writer create “my” world and

other multiple worlds. The threefold worlds match perfectly with the id, ego and superego in Freud's theory of personality: "what is" is the ego, "what ought to be" the superego and "the probable" the id, which is the hardest to uncover, much like the lowest part of an iceberg. Realism presents the objective world as "what is". Romanticism presents the subjective spiritual world as "the probable". Literature that delivers truth is the world of the superego and "what ought to be". Dung incorporates realism, romanticism, metafiction and postmodern metalepsis and confronts the id, ego and superego to move characters of the three worlds at different levels so that they communicate with each other. Multi-level interaction between the narrator and the narratee is achieved through the interaction of multiple worlds, multiple stories and multiple characters. Horizontal, vertical and diagonal combinations generate 16 possibilities for interactive communication, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Possibilities of Interactive Communication

	Actual Readers in the Physical World	Implied Readers in the Primary Actual World	Narratees in "the Probable" World	" Probable " Characters in " the Probable " World
Actual Readers in the Physical World	Multi-directional critical interactive communication between real readers	Real author inviting ideal implied readers	Honest and unbiased reflection of life	Real author taking initiative with the characters
Implied Readers in the Primary Actual World	Implied author leading readers' reflections and deconstructions of narrative authority	The Dictator having dialogues and confrontations with his peers	A perfect rapport established	Characters taking initiative with an implied author
Narratees in "What Is" World	Real readers substituting the narration with themselves and questioning the narration	Readers substituting the narrator with themselves; Narrator calling upon readers	Dialogues and role-switching between the narrator and the narratees	" The probable " characters search for the narrator

Continued

	Actual Readers in the Physical World	Implied Readers in the Primary Actual World	Narratees in “the Probable” World	“ Probable ” Characters in “ the Probable” World
“ What Is ” Characters in “ What Is” World	Real readers imagining new possibilities in “the probable” and “what is” worlds	Implied readers substituting “what is” characters with themselves	The narratees overlapping with characters from the “what is” and “the probable” worlds	Characters from the worlds of “what is” and “ the probable” have dialogues with each other

In summary, the interaction is found on four levels. First is what between characters in the same world. The emotional and passionate struggles between characters in “the probable” reveal the libido and id part of personalities. The interaction in the world of “what is”, such as the connection between the three generations of the Dung family, speaks to the complexity of the ego and reality.

The second level is the interaction between characters from different worlds, such as the worlds of “the probable” and “what is”, or the intervention of characters from “the probable” on the story of “what is”. For example, “I” in the world of “what is”, has a wife and children. Or it is the other way round, as in the case of Xuxu searching for her home and her origin, only to find “me” in the “what is” world. Furthermore, the “characters” fall in love with actual people, stepping out of the imaginary world into the first real world, and fictional characters seek their right to perpetual life. In conventional fiction, the writer creates characters, who are only the subjects of stories. Dung, however, designs characters who search for their narrators. In this postmodern parody of traversing, everything is infinitely possible.

Third, the author, the implied author and the narrator have multiple ego masks, crossing layers freely. For example, “I” have many roles: the real author, the implied author, the narrator “I”, the writer in “the probable” world, and the Dictator, Xiaodong, etc. , with infinite egos, like the novel *First Person Plural: My Life as a Multiple*. Unlike the book by Dr. West, the

splitting of the ego in *Tiangong Kaiwu* is intentional and manipulated. Ego is placed at the centre of multiple possibilities, and searches for new possibilities in the multi-level world. This also reminds one of the theory of Persona. The personas of the characters, the narrator and the Dictator, are tools to explore multiple personalities, self-reconfiguration, the true and the false self, and reality and fiction. The book explores family heritage and individual growth, and how we imagine other people, objects, families and cities with the eyes of ego. It also establishes images of the ego from others' perspectives. In a sea of shreds, amidst the predicament of interlacing outlets and loops, the ego searches for a way to break through, for integrity and consistency, for the possibility of chemically combining the worlds of psychology, literature and philosophy into one.

Metafiction places the narrator at the front of the stage and exposes the author, and therefore has a self-reflexive nature. As Waugh proposed, by disassembling the constructive process of fictional worlds, we could reveal how authorities used discourse to exert unconscious control over everyday realities (Waugh, 1984). With introspective consciousness, Dung allows the narrators to expose their own ills, making the Dictator challenge the writer's authority, and invites the readers to criticize the text, thus facilitating multiple communications between narrators and narratees. This deconstruction of authority, however, means taking responsibility.

Finally, the narratees also cross between different levels. Xuxu, for instance, has multiple identities. She is a "character" in "the probable" world and a narratee and an implied reader in the world of "what is". With the narrator and the "character" Xiaodong, now as her own narratee, she even becomes a narrator crossing between "the probable" and "what is". The original narrator recaptures the memory of his old lover from Xuxu, who is the implied narratee. This reminds us of traditional Chinese vernacular fiction, when the author would occasionally intervene with comments like "Now, my dear readers...".

In conclusion, traditional theories of narratology are insufficient for describing the uniqueness of Kai-cheung Dung's remarkable *Natural History Trilogy*. Dung creates a three-world narrative in cyber time, expanding

narration to multiple layers, metalepsis and interactive communication. According to wave-particle theory, light is both pervasive and vibrating; in Dung's text, time is simultaneously linear and punctiform. The novel displays both a particle nature in the originality of its narrative form, and a wave nature in terms of its historical implications. Seeking to build an encyclopaedic work, Dung looks beyond our universe and back to the very origin of life. His creation "manifest[s] the strange relationship between the singular reality and the plural possibilities, marking the unification of humanities and sciences after long years of separation" (Zhang, 2011, p. 31). The titles of the trilogy, *Tiangong Kaiwu* [*Works and Creation: Vivid and Lifelike*], *ShiJian Fanshi* [*Histories of Time: The Lustre of Mute Porcelain*] and *Wuzhong Yuanshi* [*The Origin of Species: Beibei is Reborn*], are obvious references and tributes to such classics as *Tiangong Kaiwu* [*Exploitation of the Works of Nature*], *A Brief History of Time*, *The Origin of Species* and *Natural History*. It is more than just a fiction, but also philosophy, and a combined history of nature and the universe. Above all it is an exploration of Hong Kong and its individuals.

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