“Think What You’re Doing, or You’ll Only Make an Ugly Reputation for Yourself”: The Plum in the Golden Vase (金瓶梅), Lying, and Literary History

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I return once more to the topic of “embedded” (or “nested”) mental states in literature. As I have argued in my earlier contribution to Cognitive Poetics (Zunshine, 2016), to make sense of what is going on in a work of fiction, readers have to continuously process mental states (i.e., thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions) embedded within each other on at least the third level (as in, “she wonders if they know that she remembers them”). These mental states can belong to fictional characters but also to the narrator, the (implied) author, and the (implied) reader. For instance, in Cao Xueqin’s The Story of the Stone (紅樓夢, c. 1760), while visiting her aunt, Mrs. Xue, Dai-yu scolds a maid who brings her a hand-warmer, because she imagines that someone may think that she thinks that her hosts are not taking good care of her. As she explains it to the surprised Mrs. Xue,

「姨媽不知道。幸虧是姨媽這裏，倘或在別人家，人家豈不惱？好說就看得人家連個手爐也沒有，巴巴的從家裏送個來。不說丫頭們太小心過餘，還只當我素日是這等輕狂慣了呢。」

“You don’t understand, Aunt ... It doesn’t matter here, with you; but some people might be deeply offended at the sight of one of my maids rushing in with a hand-warmer. It’s though I thought my hosts couldn’t supply one themselves if I needed it. Instead of saying how thoughtful the maid was, they would put it down to my arrogance and lack of breeding.” (193)

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In Eileen Chang’s “Lust, Caution” (“色戒,” 1979), as Jiazhi listens to Mr. Yi’s bantering with a friend of his wife (馬太太), she wonders if that friend knows that Mr. Yi wants other people to know that he and Jiazhi are having an affair:

看他笑嘻嘻的神气, 也甚至于馬太太這話還帶點討好的意味, 知道他想人知道, 恨不得要人家取笑他兩句.
Observing him smile and banter, Jiazhi even began to read a flattering undertone into Ma Taitai’s remark, as if she knew that he wanted other people to coax the details of his conquest out of him.

In Lu Xun’s “A Madman’s Diary” (“狂人日記,” 1918), the protagonist finds it infinitely amusing that a doctor, whom his older brother brought in to consult, says that he’ll be “better” if he rests “quietly for a few days.” Because he thinks that the doctor is “the executioner in disguise” and what he and the brother really want is to eat him, resting quietly for a few days will only fatten him up and thus give them “more to eat.” So he laughs uproariously and watches them turn pale, “awed” by his “courage and integrity”:

我忍不住, 便放聲大笑起來, 十分快活。自己曉得這笑聲裏面, 有的是義勇和正氣。老頭子和大哥, 都失了色, 被我這勇氣正氣鎮壓住了.
I could not help roaring with laughter, I was so amused. I knew that in this laughter were courage and integrity. Both the old man and my brother turned pale, awed by my courage and integrity. (19)

The reader knows, however, that the protagonist doesn’t realize that the reason that the two men turn pale is that they think that his laughter is a sure sign of his insanity. Or, to put it differently, the (implied) author wants the readers to realize that the mad protagonist misinterprets the body language of his visitors.

Complex embeddings of mental states can be implied by the text, as in the case of “A Madman’s Diary,” or explicitly spelled out, as when Jiazhi wonders about how much Ma Tai Tai knows about Mr. Yi’s intentions (“知道他想人知道”). They typically coalesce on the level of paragraphs (or scenes, in drama), but individual sentences may feature them as well. It can be said that fiction as we know it today (i.e., novels, short stories, drama, narrative poetry, and memoirs concerned with imagination and consciousness) cannot function on a lower-than-thirdlevel of embedment.In this
respect, it differs from both our daily social interactions, which call for this kind of complex embedment only occasionally, and from other written discourses, such as literary nonfiction or newspaper articles, which may feature occasional third-level embedments, but, on the whole, operate quite happily on the first and second level of embedment. Indeed, by making readers embed mental states within mental states within mental states at a rate unprecedented in any other context, fiction may contribute to our perception of its specialness, or “literariness.”

The conversation about embedded mental states is, of course, a part of a much larger conversation about “theory of mind” (also known as “mindreading”), that is, our evolved cognitive adaptation for explaining our own and other people’s observable behavior as caused by unobservable mental states. For instance, I see a man running up to the bus stop just as the doors close and the bus starts pulling away, and banging once or twice on the closed door, and I assume that he is disappointed about having missed the bus and hopes that the driver will still let him in. If the bus just keeps moving, I may say to myself that perhaps the driver would have liked to help out the man but was aware of the regulations that prohibit him from reopening the doors in such situations, or I may conclude that the driver was feeling mean and grumpy today, and myself feel bad for the man. Note the incessant mindreading — ascription of thoughts and feelings to myself and others — that allows me to make sense of what I have just observed. Presumably the same evolved cognitive adaptations allow readers of fiction to interpret (and misinterpret) the behavior of fictional characters, while allowing the writers to intuitively experiment with patterns of mindreading present in the text.

Here is a challenge faced by literary scholars interested in applying research into “theory of mind” to the study of fiction. While we may assume that mindreading (and, unavoidably, mind-misreading) is an inalienable feature of human social cognition, we know very little about the history of complex embedment in literature. A quick look at ancient plays and novels shows that third-level embedment of mental states has been around for a long time (one finds it in Homer, Petronius, Apuleius, Heliodorus, Murasaki Shikibu, Wang Shifu, and Luo Guanzhong), but in many cultures, the meager number of surviving texts makes it difficult to construct a convincing argument about the early evolution of this trend in different genres.

Nevertheless, it’s important to try to historicize complex embedment of mental states in fiction, if only in the form of a preliminary hypothesis, which can then be tested and corroborated by others. Or refuted! — if the evidence from a particular national literature weighs in against it — which will still be grist for the mill of
cognitive historicism[^1], and thus a welcome addition to a cognitivist project.

Here, then, is one such working hypothesis. It appears that the further back one goes in time, the likelier it is that third-level embedments in fiction are created by portraying characters who intentionally deceive other characters. This is in contrast to more “modern” literature, in which third-level embedments are created by a much wider variety of representational means, which include deception, but are by no means limited to it.

Elsewhere I have explored this hypothesis as applied to Russian literary history. Russia may represent a particularly useful case study because their secular literary tradition is both fairly recent and relatively well preserved (as compared, for instance, to ancient Greek literature, of which only one percent has survived). Indeed, it seems that one may actually pinpoint a particular historical moment when Russian writers “learned” to embed complex mental states without relying exclusively on plots of deception.

To illustrate the contrast between these two modes of embedment, we may want to look at the earliest surviving examples of Russian secular literature, explicitly positioned as fiction (as opposed, that is, to historical chronicles and hagiographies), such as Fedor Kuritzyn’s the Tale of Dracula (Povest’ o Drakule) (c. 1490), Ermolay-Erazm’s the Tale of Peter and Fevroniya (Povest’ o Petre i Fevronii) (1547), and the Tale of Frol Skobeev (Povest’ o Frole Skobeeve) (c. 1680—1720). All of them achieve complex embedment exclusively through plots of deception. For instance, in the Tale of Frol Skobeev (c. 1680—1720), Frol, an enterprising pettifogger, tricks the only daughter of a rich courtier into sleeping with him and then elopes with her. When the distraught parents find out what has happened, they first want to prosecute the rogue, but quickly relent and start showering the young couple with land and money, all the while cursing their “thief” and “knave” of a son-in-law. What hastens their change of heart is a strategic lie masterminded by Frol. When the angry but concerned parents send a servant to inquire about the health of their child, Frol asks his wife to pretend to be sick, because he wants them to think that their anger is killing her: “See for yourself, my friend, how she’s doing: that’s what parental wrath does — they scold and curse her from afar, and here she is, dying.”[^2] And so it goes: Frol rises to wealth and nobility through bribery, crossdressing, and blackmail, that is, through social situations rich

[^1]: For representative works in cognitive historicism, see Richardson’s *The Neural Sublime*, Crane’s *Shakespeare’s Brain*, and Spolsky’s *Satisfying Skepticism*. For a useful review of the broader field, see 熊沐清, “文学批评的认知转向.”

with opportunities for deception (and third-level embedment).

The early 1760s saw a watershed moment in the development of the national literature because, for the first time, works of European fiction entered Russian cultural imagination. The reading public discovered novels by Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Lesage, Marivaux, and Rousseau. Then, almost overnight, Russian literature changed. Alongside embedment of complex mental states driven by deception there appeared embedment driven by the buildup of complex emotions.

Consider Fedor Emin (1735—1770) a prolific author of foreign extraction, known as the first Russian novelist, who wrote imitating French sentimentalism. Here, for instance, is a plea of a young man from Emin’s 1766 epistolary novel *Letters of Ernest and Doravra (Pisma Ernesta i Doravry)*, in which the anguished lover (operating on the fourth level of embedment) hopes that his beloved will pity the man who knows that he won’t be able to stop thinking about her even when they part forever:

> Forget my fault and know that the love that’s devouring me deserves punishment, not contempt. No one is angry at a person condemned to death; everyone pities him; and if you, heavenly beauty, follow the way of worldly justice, you will pity the miserable, from whom this letter will be the last, who can’t cause you more chagrin, and who, going to his eternal confinement, carries with him the fiercest memory of your charms, which will never cease tormenting all his thoughts, his feelings, and his whole nature.¹

The first half of the nineteenth-century saw further expansion of pathways to complex embedment through the figures of narrators with distinct personalities in the works of Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Nicolai Gogol. Thus in Pushkin’s *The Tales of Belkin* (1831), Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time* (1840), and Gogol’s “The Overcoat” (1842), complex mental states are created by a subtle give-and-take between the implied reader and the implied author. Readers are aware of the author’s intention to filter the story through an idiosyncratic consciousness of its narrator. Characters may still deceive each other, but complex embedments created by deception merely add to the rich assortment of complex embedments created by the tone of the narration.

Can we apply the same two-pronged hypothesis to Chinese literary history? That is, can we say that the further back one goes in time the likelier it is that third-level embedments of mental states in Chinese fiction arise exclusively from situations in

¹ Translation mine. Original at http://az.lib.ru/e/emin_f_a/text_0020.shtml
which characters intentionally deceive other characters? And can we further say that then something happens, and, after a certain point in time, more and more complex embedments are created by social contexts other than lying, including the tone of the narration? And what may that “something” be?

I argued that, in the case of Russian literature, we can show that the expansion of embedment techniques in the late eighteenth century owed to the sudden massive influx of Western European models in the 1760s. Chinese literary history clearly developed along a very different trajectory. Given my limited expertise in Chinese culture, I cannot reconstruct that trajectory. That is, I can’t say that this expansion started with such and such a writer, or group of writers, and at such and such a time. All I can do is to contrast patterns of complex embedment in various works of Chinese literature, demonstrating that there is indeed a noticeable difference in those patterns when we go further back in time, to the third, ninth, and even sixteenth-century. What I hope to achieve with such a demonstration is to elicit responses from other scholars, better qualified to speak of Chinese literary tradition, who can dispute or corroborate my findings.

We begin with “Scholar T’an” (“談生”), dated to the late second-early third century and attributed to Cao Pi. It tells a story of an old bachelor suddenly blessed with a beautiful wife, who, however, asks him not to “shine any lights” on her at night for three years. They live together and have a son, but when the child is two years old, T’an’s curiosity gets the better of him:

不能忍，夜伺其寢後，盜照視之，其腰已上生肉如人，腰下但有枯骨。

One night, lurking and waiting after his wife had gone to bed, he stealthily shone a light on her. From the waist up she was just like any human being, but from that point downward there was no flesh, only dried-out bones (387).

T’an will lose his wife, but, eventually, gain riches and palace employment, for, the woman turns out to have been the late daughter of a local prince. The story is very short, and T’an’s preparing to disobey his wife’s injunction is, as far as I can see, its only instance of third-level embedment. T’an doesn’t want his wife to know that he intends to find out who she really is — hence all the “lurking” and “waiting after she had gone to bed” and shining a light “stealthily.”

“Scholar Ts’ui” (“崔書生”) is a story by Niu Seng-ju, dated to the early ninth century. Its protagonist falls in love with a beautiful woman and marries her without
informing his mother. That leads to a lie (and third-level embedment of mental states), which will have fatal consequences. Ts’ui doesn’t want his mother to think that he married without letting her know, so he tells her that he had merely “taken a concubine” (414). The mother eventually breaks up the couple, as neither she nor her son know that the young woman is a daughter of a goddess, and that staying married to her for at least a year, could bestow immortality on Ts’ui and his family.

Deception continues to drive complex embedment in Luo Guanzhong’s *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三國演義，14th century). Consider the story of Wang Yun giving Diaochan to Dong Zhuo as a concubine, in order to sow discord between Dong Zhuo and Lv Bu. Once Dong Zhuo and Lv Bu are both besotted with Diaochan, she takes turns manipulating them:

呂布入內問安，正值卓睡。貂蟬於床後探半身望布，以手指心，又以手指董卓，揮淚不止。布心如碎。

One day Lv Bu went to inquire after his father’s health. Dong Zhuo was asleep, and Diaochan was sitting at the head of his couch. Leaning forward she gazed at the young man, with her hand pointing first at her heart, then at the sleeping old man, and her tears fell. Lv Bu felt heartbroken. (96)

Diaochan wants Lv Bu to think that she loves him and not Dong Zhuo. Later on, when Dong Zhuo accuses her of consorting with Lv Bu, she pretends to want to commit suicide to prove her devotion to Dong Zhuo. That is, now she wants him to think that she loves him and not Lv Bu. And so it goes on, until, driven by anxiety and jealousy and secretly aided by Wang Yun, Lv Bu kills his foster father.

In Wu Cheng’en’s *Journey to the West* (西遊記，16th century), we don’t seem to encounter any third-level embedments until characters start deceiving each other. Thus, when the monk Xuanzang and his mother, Yin Wenqiao, are reunited after seventeen years, she is afraid that Liu, the man who murdered her husband and is now living with her (against her will, and pretending to be that dead husband), will kill Xuanzang. The mother and the son agree to meet again at Golden Mountain Temple, but she has to invent some lie to explain to Liu why she has to visit that temple. So she pretends that she is sick and needs to go to some temple to fulfill a charity vow, and she even makes Liu think that she doesn’t know to which temple she should go, so he is the one who suggests the possible temples nearby:
小姐道：「我兒，你火速抽身前去。劉賊若回，他必害你性命。我明日假裝一病，只說先年曾許捨百雙僧鞋，來你寺中還願。那時節，我有話與你說。」玄奘依言拜別。

卻說小姐自見兒子之後，心內一憂一喜。忽一日推病，茶飯不吃，臥於床上。劉洪歸衙，問其原故。小姐道：「我幼時曾許下一願，許捨僧鞋一百雙。昨五日之前，夢見個和尚手執利刃，要索僧鞋，便覺身子不快。」劉洪道：「這些小事，何不早說？」隨升堂，吩咐王左衙、李右衙：江州城內百姓，每家要辦僧鞋一雙，限五日內完納。百姓俱依派完納訖。小姐對劉洪道：「僧鞋做完，這裡有甚麼寺院，好去還願？」劉洪道：「這江州有個金山寺、焦山寺，聽你在那個寺裡去。」小姐道：「久聞金山寺好個寺院，我就往金山寺去。」

Next day she lay on her bed, refusing food and drink. When Liu questioned her, she said, “I once made a vow to give a hundred pairs of shoes as alms. Five nights ago, I dreamed that a priest, holding a sword in his hand, came to claim the shoes. Since then I have felt ill.” “That can easily be settled,” he said. “I wish you had told me before.” He went to his stewards and told them to get a hundred peasant families of the neighborhood each to plait a pair of straw shoes and send them in within five days. When this had been done, and the shoes duly received, she asked Liu what temples there were in the neighborhood, where she could fulfill her vow. “The Golden Mountain Temple and the Burnt Mountain Temple,” he said. “Either would do.” “I have often heard that the Golden Mountain Temple is well worth a visit,” she said. “I think I will go there.” (91)

To map this passage out in terms of its embedded mental states: Yin Wenqiao wants Liu to think that she wants to visit a temple. She also wants him to think that she doesn’t know what temples there are in their neighborhood. This is how third-level embedments gain foothold in *Journey to the West*: through the carefully laid-out lies.

*The Plum in the Golden Vase* (金瓶梅, late sixteenth century) is an interesting case. Like *Journey to the West*, it relies on deception to generate complex embedments, but there is simply no comparison between the two in the frequency of such embedments. In *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, characters lie constantly; sometimes there are multiple lies on the same page; sometimes it is difficult to figure out if in a particular scene there is anyone not lying. For instance, when Hsi-men Ch’ing (justly) accuses his concubine Pan Chin-lien of sleeping with a page boy, Ch’in-t’ung, Chin-lien wants him to think
that this trumped-up charge was prompted by the *anger and jealousy* of Hsi-men Ch’ing’s other consorts:

婦人道：“就屈殺了奴罷了！是那個不逢好死的嚼舌根的淫婦，嚼他那旺跳身子。見你當時進奴這屋裡來歇，無非都氣不憤，拿這有天沒日頭的事壓枉奴。”

“They do me a mortal injustice, that’s all there is to it,” the woman said. “It’s all the doing of some backbiting whore, who will come to a bad end, eating her heart out when she sees how often you come to my room to spend the night, and angry enough to try to nail me with such a preposterous story.”

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Hsi-men Ch’ing then calls over Chin-lien’s maidservant, P’ang Ch’un-mei, and asks her if her mistress “has really been engaged in hanky-panky with the page boy or not,” promising her that if Ch’un-mei will tell him to “forgive the whore” (237), he will (“說饒了淫婦，我就饒了罷”). He *wants* her to *think* that he *likes* her so much that her word will be enough to let off Chin-lien, but we don’t know if he’s telling the truth. Ch’un-mei clearly doesn’t believe him and corroborates her mistress’s lie with her own. Not only does she *want* him to *think* that the information about the adultery was “all fabricated by someone” out of *jealousy*, but she also *wants* him to *imagine* what other people will *think* when they find out about his rash behavior:

“這個都是人氣不憤俺娘兒們，做作出這樣事來。爹，你也要個主張，好把醜名兒頂在頭上，傳出外邊去好聽?”

“This is all something fabricated by someone who is jealous of Mother and me. Father, you ought to think what you’re doing, or you’ll only make an ugly reputation for yourself, which won’t sound any too good when it gets abroad.” (237)

In this particular example, an outright lie is sandwiched between two manipulative statements: Ch’un-mei *knows* that Hsi-men Ch’ing *knows* that some of the other wives and concubines are indeed *jealous* of Chin-lien, and she *knows* that Hsi-men Ch’ing *cares* about what other people *think*. *The Plum in the Golden Vase* thus appears to be doing something innovative with its embedment of mental states: some embeddings arise from situations that are adjacent to lies or share social context with lies. The
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hothouse atmosphere of the novel — with its endless affairs, squabbling, intrigue, and manipulation — thus allows for experimenting with new ways of representing complex subjectivity. Would it be fair to say that The Plum in the Golden is one of the first or at least one of the early examples of works of Chinese literature that goes beyond straight deception to construct complex embedments and does it on a rather massive scale? Again, one hopes here for input from colleagues with more expertise in Chinese literary history than I have.

Not far removed from The Plum in the Golden in time, is another, much shorter work of fiction, Feng Meng-lung’s “Tu Shih-niang Sinks the Jewel Box in Anger” (“杜十娘怒沉百寶箱,”1624), which, thought quite different from The Plum in the Golden Vase in tone and intent, also goes beyond deception to construct its complex embedments. On the one hand, playboy Sun Fu merely wants Li Chia to think that he sincerely wants to help him. As he puts it, “Please consider my offer carefully. It is not that I covet your concubine’s beauty; I only want to do what I can for you as a friend” (“兄請三思, 仆非貪麗人之色, 實為兄效忠于万一也!”). In reality he does covet the beauty of Li’s soon-to-be-wife, Shih-niang, and hopes that the weak-minded Li will sell her to him for a thousand taels of silver. Similarly, when Shih-niang learns about Sun’s proposal and Li’s readiness to acquiesce to it, she wants Li to think that she likes the idea of Sun’s buying her from Li (“誠兩便之策也”; “Yes, this plan suits us both”), when in fact this is when she decides to commit suicide.

On the other hand, the conversation between Shih-niang and Li contains psychological nuances that go beyond mere deception, and, to appreciate them, readers must embed mental states on at least the third level. Specifically, when Shih-niang learns of Sun’s proposal, she immediately sees through it and understands that it was driven by Sun’s selfishness and lust. Her body language and tone of voice signal that she realizes that Sun merely wanted Li to think that he cares about his dilemma, and that she suspects that Li is not capable of understanding that she doesn’t really mean what she says, nor is, indeed, capable of appreciating her love for him:

十娘放開兩手, 冷笑一聲道: “為郎君畫此計者, 此人乃大英雄也!” Shi-niang withdrew her hands from him, smiling sardonically. “He must be a fine gentleman, indeed a hero, to have conceived this plan for you.” (158)

Equally important is another little detail, which again, calls for complex embedment of mental states on the part of the reader that has little to do with deception.
Even while Shih-niang is adorning herself — in Li’s full view — to go to Sun, her “new client,” she is still waiting for Li to change his mind. We know this because when a servant comes from Sun to inquire about Li’s answer, Shih-niang steals “a glance at Li” and only upon “seeing that he [looks] pleased, [urges] him to go and claim his “silver as soon as possible” (“十娘微窥公子, 欣欣似有喜色, 乃催公子快去回话, 及早兌足銀子 ”). In other words, even as she is preparing to kill herself, she is ready to give Li another chance because she still hopes that he will realize that he loves her more than the security (and immediate familial approbation) offered by one thousand silver teals. Or, to put it differently, she hopes that she hasn’t been as wrong as she now suspects she has, in loving and trusting this young man. The stealthy glance is thus a poignant sign of Shih-niang’s painfully divided consciousness throughout this scene. If we understand its implications — that is, if we process the complex embedment implied by that glance — we realize that Shih-niang has just decided anew that she will not live.

In Wu Ching-Tzu’s *The Scholars* (儒林外史, 1750), when the Magistrate Shih wants Wang Mien, a peasant who paints exquisite pictures of flowers, to pay him a visit (so that a distinguished scholar and Shih’s superior, Mr. Wei, can meet this prodigy), and Wang Mien refuses, the Magistrate has to decide to what to do next. What is interesting about this episode is that it features both complex embedments created by lying and those created by an interplay of the mental states of the reader and the implied author.

Wang Mien turns down the Magistrate’s invitation (which he correctly recognizes as a thinly-veiled order) because he is a man of independent spirit who doesn’t want to curry favor with the high and mighty. His refusal, however, creates a problem for Bailiff Chai, whom the Magistrate employed as his messenger. To help Chai save face, Wang’s friend and neighbor, Old Chin, suggests that Chai tell Magistrate Shih that Wang Mien is ill. That is, Old Chin doesn’t want Shih to know that Wang Mien doesn’t consider his invitation a particular honor. Instead he wants him to think that Wang Mien would like to come and only his illness prevents him from doing so.

When the Magistrate hears the Bailiff’s report, he doesn’t believe it:

知縣心里想道: “這小斯那里害什么病！想是瞿家這奴才，走下鄉，狐假虎威，著實恐嚇了他一場；他從來不曾見過官府的人，害怕不敢來了。老師既把這個人托我，我若不把他就叫了來見老師，也惹得老師笑我做事疲軟；我不如竟自己下鄉去拜他。他看見賞他臉面，斷不是難為他的
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意思，自然大著膽見我。我就順便帶了他來見老師，卻不是辦事勤敏？”
又想道：“堂堂一個縣令，屈尊去拜一個鄉民，惹得衙役們笑話……”
又想到：“老師前日口气，甚是敬他；老師敬他十分，我就該敬他百分。況且屈尊敬賢，將來志書上少不得稱贊一篇；這是万古千年不朽的勾當，有甚么做不得？”

When Magistrate Shih heard the bailiff’s report, he thought, “How can the fellow be ill? It’s all the fault of this rascal Chai. He goes down to the villages like a donkey in a lion’s hide, and he must have scared this painter fellow out of his wits. Wang Mien has never seen an official before in his life. He’s afraid to come. But my patron charged me personally to get this man, and if I fail to produce him, Mr. Wei will think me incompetent. I had better go to the village myself to call on him. When he sees what an honour I’m doing him, he’ll realize nobody wants to make trouble for him and won’t be afraid to see me. Then I’ll take him to call on my patron, and my patron will appreciate the smart way I’ve handled it.”

Then, however, it occurred to him that his subordinates might laugh at the idea of a county magistrate calling on a mere peasant. Yet Mr. Wei had spoken of Wang Mien with the greatest respect. “If Mr. Wei respects him, I should respect him ten times as much,” Magistrate Shih reflected. “And if I stoop in order to show respect to talent, future compilers of the local chronicles will certainly devote a chapter to my praise. Then my name will be remembered for hundreds of years. Why shouldn’t I do it?” (40)

This passage is an avalanche of complex embedments. Magistrate Shih thinks that Wang Mien only wants him to think that he is ill because he is, in reality, afraid of government officials. This leads him to believe that if he visits the humble rustic in his own august person, Wang Mien will realize that nobody intends him any ill. Readers, of course, know that Shih is mistaken in his assessment of Wang Mien’s feelings — a bit of dramatic irony here. The real joke of the situation, however, comes with the sly conversation that Wu Ching-Tzu is having with us. Shih fondly imagines that “future compilers of local chronicles “will devote a whole chapter to his praise. And, as a matter of fact, Wu Ching-Tzu does devote a couple of pages to him, and these are the pages that we are reading. Wu Ching-Tzu wants us to be aware that Shih imagines that future generations will think that he wanted to “show respect to talent”, and he also wants us to suspect that Shih’s hopes may have been disappointed. The Magistrate is
not an unsympathetic character, but because we know that he wanted us to admire him for his respect for talent, we are not sure anymore that he is worthy of our admiration.

Again, this episode starts out with a complex embedment driven by a lie circulating among the characters, but it ends with a complex give-and-take of mental states between the character, the author, and the implied readers. We see more of this kind of give-and-take throughout the rest of The Scholars. In this respect, The Scholars develops the legacy of experimentation with new ways of embedding mental states started by The Plum in the Golden Vase, a novel which may thus be credited with having transformed the landscape of fictional mindreading in Chinese literary tradition through what may seem to be an unsavory obsession with illicit sex and its boon companions: lying, cheating, and pretending.

There is still plenty of that to go around in Cao Xueqin’s The Story of the Stone (紅樓夢, c. 1760). Yet the complex embedment of mental states expected from the readers of this novel is not limited to plots of deception. Most of it emerges from the subtle nuances of mindreading and misreading between characters (particularly Dai-yu and Bao-yu) which doesn’t involve lying, as well as from the tone of the narration.

Having explored complex embeddings in The Story of the Stone elsewhere [demonstrating, for instance, how they can arise through the mere use of “yīgè” (“a” or “the”) before a character’s name (Zunshine, 2016: 31)], I will here give you only one example. In chapter 9, Bao-yu, on his first day of school, decides to visit Dai-yu to say goodbye. After chatting with her for a while, he is finally ready to tear himself away, but Dai-yu stops him to ask if he’s “going to say good-bye to [his cousin] Bao-chai,” too. In response, Bao-yu smiles but says nothing and goes “straight off to school with [his friend] Qin Zhong” (205) (“黛玉忙又叫住，問道：「你怎麼不去辭辭你寶姐姐呢？」寶玉笑而不答，一逕同秦鐘上學去了”).

How are readers to make sense of this exchange? While there are several different ways to interpret Bao-yu’s smile, it’s important to note that all of them seem to involve complex embeddings, some reaching even to fourth and fifth level. For instance, we may say that Bao-yu smiles because he thinks that he knows that Dai-yu doesn’t really want him to stop by Bao-chai’s room to say good-bye. That is, he thinks that he knows that Dai-yu (sensitive as she always is to how her behavior may be perceived by others) doesn’t want anyone to think that she thinks she has any right to usurp Bao-yu’s attention on this particular morning.

Moreover, by telling us that Bao-yu goes straight to school instead of indeed stopping by Bao-chai’s room first, Cao wants us to be aware not just of the clear
preference that Bao-yu has for Dai-yu, but also of the tortuous way in which the admission of this preference was extracted from him. Bao-yu certainly hasn’t planned to play favorites this morning — it’s not likely that he’d even been thinking about it when he stopped by Dai-yu’s room — but Dai-yu’s self-conscious remark has made him express his feelings. Ironically, this is what Dai-yu would have wanted — even though she would never admit that to anyone. Bao-yu’s smile thus can also be interpreted as his realization that Dai-yu has just made him newly aware that he likes her more than he likes than Bao-chai — and that she did it without being implicated in doing so and perhaps not even intending it.

I expect that not every reader will agree with my interpretation of Bao-yu’s smile. What’s important, however, is that even if you disagree with my interpretation and propose you own, yours is still likely to feature a complex embedment of mental states. That is, to do justice to a nuanced psychological dynamic conjured up by Cao, we have to embed mental states on at least the third level, even if their exact content and configuration differ from one reader to another. In fact, this may be seen as a representational technique particularly associated with Cao: his complex embeddings are frequently ambiguous, calling for different, sometimes conflicting interpretations.

The profound influence of *The Story of the Stone* on the subsequent development of Chinese literature is a well-explored topic in critical studies (Plaks 2006; Wei 2010). We may further enrich our understanding of that influence if we retrace its history by looking specifically at the patterns of embedment associated with it. It would be interesting to see, for instance, to what extent numerous imitations and revisions of this novel (Wei 2012), embed complex mental states in the same ambiguous, open-ended manner.

My last examples will return us to twentieth-century Chinese literature and indicate an even broader range of representational strategies used to construct complex embedments of mental states. I have shown already how in Lu Xun’s “A Madman’s Diary,” readers are made to realize that the mad narrator’s visitors aren’t “awed” by his “courage and integrity,” even though he thinks they are. Now consider the first sentence of Eileen Chang’s *The Golden Cangue* (金鎖記, 1943):

三十年前的上海，一個有月亮的晚上……我們也許沒赶上看見三十年前的月亮。

Shanghai thirty years ago on a moonlit night ... maybe we did not get to see the moon of thirty years ago (171).
It’s a melancholy opening, an admission of defeat that, nevertheless, powerfully draws readers into the narrator’s elegiac orbit: the narrator knows that readers may not be able to imagine what she wants them to imagine.

Or look at the first lines of Mo Yan’s Red Sorghum (红高粱家族, 1986):

一九三九年古历八月初九, 我父亲这个土匪种十四岁多一点。他跟着后来名满天下的传奇英雄余占鳌司令的队伍去胶平公路伏击日本人的汽车队。

The ninth day of the eighth lunar month, 1939. My father, a bandit’s offspring who had passed his fifteenth birthday, was joining the forces of Commander Yu Zhan’ao, a man destined to become a legendary hero, to ambush a Japanese convoy on the Jiao-Ping highway. (3)

Whatever thoughts and feelings the protagonists may have on this occasion, we don’t know them, not yet. Instead, we are aware of the ironic clash of perspectives on the ideology of heroism. Readers familiar with the Chinese novels of the 1950s-1960s, which “emphasized that the anti-Japanese war was led by the Communist Party — therefore all of the heroes in these novels are Party members” (Maiping, 36) — may believe that Mo is challenging that tradition. Whoever would contemptuously describe the narrator’s father as a “bandit’s offspring” is about to be taught a lesson, for Commander Yu is a “man destined to become a legendary hero” (and is a throwback, perhaps, to an ancient literary tradition, in which heroes were bandits). To map this out in terms of embedded mental states, the narrator wants his readers to rethink the conventional view of heroism.

Note that lying remains a reliable source of complex embedment in fiction. In fact, certain genres are defined by plots of deception. Chang’s own “Lust, Caution” is, after all, a story of subterfuge and espionage. Looming large against Jiazhi’s fleeting wondering if Ma Tai Tai thinks that Mr. Yi wants her to tease him about his affairs, is the main lie of the story: Mr. Yi’s not knowing that Jiazhi is supposed to make him think that she loves him in order to make it possible for her comrades-in-resistance to kill him. No writer, in other words, even one as sophisticated as Eileen Chang, would ignore the ready potential of a plot of deception for constructing complex fictional subjectivities.

Still, do we really need cognitive science to talk about those complex fictional
subjectivities? After all, the emergence of new representational techniques that I discuss in this essay has already been extensively studied and described by scholars without any recourse to “cognitive” theory. Thus Slavists know about the importance of the European influence for the course of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Russian literature (Serman, 67-70), just as Sinologists are aware of the special role of both *The Plum in the Golden Vase* and *The Story of the Stone*. Thus “Chen Dakang sees 1590 as the date at which the vernacular novel began to flourish” (Lu, 101), while Shang Wei points out that the literati novels “of the mid- and late Qianlong era . . . had so little in common with the earlier novels that their emergence in the mid-eighteenth century could well indicate the rise of a new narrative form” (2010, 269). Similarly, North American narrative theorists have explored the transformative potential of the interplay between the perspectives of the narrator and the author. As Robert Scholes *et al* put it: “In any example of narrative art there are, broadly speaking, three points of view — those of the characters, the narrators, and the audience. As narrative becomes more sophisticated, a fourth point of view is added by the development of a clear distinction between the narrator and the author” (240). What, then, can cognitive literary theory add to these insights?

To begin with, it allows us to avoid some potentially embarrassing dilemmas. At this point, if a literary critic wants to explain how it happened that several disparate cultures have all arrived at a point at which the interplay of complex subjectivities is central to their fictional representations, she has two options. She can explain it through cross-cultural influences, which works well when it does (as in the case of Western Europe and late eighteenth-century Russia), but when it doesn’t work at all (as in the case of late sixteenth- and eighteenth-century China and Europe), she has to treat it as a wonderful coincidence. (Helped, no doubt, by certain historical developments that the cultures may have in common, such as the availability of the vernacular literary language and the advanced means of textual reproduction, but still, nevertheless, a coincidence.) For a scholar is not used to evoking serendipity to account for cross-cultural similarities, this is not a very attractive option.

This dilemma loses its sting if we admit insights from cognitive literary theory and consider the crucial role of theory of mind in the production and consumption of fiction. Reading mental states into our own and other people’s behavior, whether correctly or not, is fundamental to human communication, so it’s not terribly surprising that imaginary representations of social relations (i.e., fiction) imitate patterns of daily mindreading. And not just imitate. As Patrick Colm Hogan has observed, writers
intuitively know how to reimagine our routine social interactions in a richer, more intense and engaging way (forthcoming). So if we assume that both Chinese and European writers have always unselfconsciously yet consistently experimented with new ways of representing complex social consciousness, the emergence of new patterns of embedment of complex mental states in Chinese and European works of fiction appears not as a miraculous coincidence but as one of several possible outcomes of such experimentation.

Various historical factors, such as the availability of the vernacular literary language, certainly contribute, but they cannot be considered in isolation from the cognitive makeup of our mindreading (and misreading) species. To bring this point into sharper relief, consider this. We have seen that in some situations cross-cultural influence may explainsimilarities in representational techniques, but now I want to put some pressure on that argument. Imagine a fantastic scenario in which, in eighteenth-century Russia, everyone’s “theory of mind” was “turned off,” that is, Russians were somehow incapable of / not interested in the attribution of mental states. Now ask yourself if any European novels depicting complex embedment of mental states would even make it into Russia under these conditions. They wouldn’t, because nobody would care to read them and, consequently, nobody would care enough to translate them. In other words, even in the case of the seemingly straightforward foreign influence, it is the readers’ capacity for and interest in mindreading that makes the influence possible. Just so, all the historical factors in the world wouldn’t result in the appearance of works of fiction that experiment with different ways of embedding complex mental states if readers (and writers) didn’t have an evolved cognitive capacity to attribute mental states to themselves and others.

This is why cognitive theory provides a useful complement to more traditional literary theory. In principle, any explanations of how new genres and representational strategies come to be, can benefit from inquiry into underlying cognitive processes. But, especially when it comes to the history of fictional narratives concerned with people’s motivations, intentions, and desires, we’d do well to ask how such narratives build on readers’ capacity to attribute (and misattribute) motivations, intentions, and desires. If we discover that, one, the practice of embedding complex mental states seems to be common to numerous literary traditions, and, two, that over time some of those traditions develop a broader range of techniques for portraying complex embedments, we then have a better foundation for inquiring about historical particularities involved in those developments. By helping us escape both historical determinism and its flip
“Think What You’re Doing, Or You’ll Only Make an Ugly Reputation for Yourself”:
The Plum in the Golden Vase (金瓶梅), Lying, and Literary History

side (i.e., awkward talk about wonderful cross-cultural coincidences), cognitive theory thus allows us to become better — more responsible — literary historians.

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