A Greimasian Reading of *Matrimony Inn*

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A. J. Greimas is one of the most important French semioticians and narrative theorists of this century. His works, however, are known to non-French speakers mainly through secondary sources, such as Fredric Jameson's *The Prison House of Language* and *The Political Unconscious*, Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*, Terrence Hawke's *Structuralism and Semiotics*, and Robert Scholes' *Structuralism in Literature*. Only until recently were two of Greimas' books, *Semiotics and Language* and *Structural Semantics*, made available to English readers through translation. His major theoretical essay, "Elements of a Narrative Grammar," was also translated into English a few years ago.

In his article, "New Strategies for the Study of Contemporary Chinese Literature," D. W. Fokkema outlines three stages in the development of comparatism: positivist, formalist-aesthetic, and semiotic.[1] He suggests that the semiotic approach be adopted in the study of contemporary Chinese literature. In the West, structuralist and semiotic study of literature is more successful in medieval literature than in contemporary literature, particularly that after Henry James. Even in pre-modern literature, there is the distinction between the study of narrative and that of poetic and dramatic works. The study of narrative in the last ten years has led to the emergence of a new area, usually referred to as narratology.

In Chinese literature, Chi Ch'iu-liang, Chang Han-liang, Chou Ying-hsiung, William S. Tay, and Ku T'ien-hung are among the foremost to give attention to the validity and, of course, limitations of the structuralist-semiotic approach. Most Chinese readers may be more familiar with Todorov and Bremond than with Greimas. Since the rise of deconstructionism and *rezeptionsästhetik* in English-speaking academic circles in recent years,

structuralism and semiotics have become less attractive to some literary critics. Yet, as Fokkema and Kunne-Ibsch have pointed out, the study of structure has the advantage of setting limits to the readers' response.[2] It is still the basis of many approaches that have recently become fashionable.

To comparatists, the approach along the line of structuralism and semiotics is particularly worthy of attention. If comparative literature is the study of not only individual works but also the comparative aspects of them, then some degree of generalization and theoretization is unavoidable. Even in the sonnet, the most classical example, the study of the general form is as important to a comparatist as any given sonnet's individual qualities. Comparative literature is both an individualized and a generalized approach to literature. A comparatist can never study a single work or a single author in isolation. Hence, to a comparatist, the study of a work's narrative pattern is not so illuminating as the grammar of narrative. It is in this sense that recent explorations in literary theory are useful to comparatism. Jonathan Culler thus argues in his essay, "Comparative Literature and Literary Theory," that literary influence and reception, two important concetps in comparative literature, be viewed as a matter of intertextuality and text-reader interaction.[3]

As many critics remark, a structural analysis is not an interpretive activity, but it can lead to interpretation. Semiotics as a study of signification systems can offer what structuralism cannot. The present study is meant to be an attempt to relate a Chinese work to a literary phenomenon in the West so as to reveal its comparative aspects. It is a study of a Chinese tale, *Matrimony Inn* (*Ting-hun tien* 定婚店), in relation to Greimas' narrative grammar or what Todorov calls "the existence of a universal grammar" of narrative in his book, *The Poetics of Prose*. Adopting the Chinese Buddhist belief in his book, *S/Z*, Roland Barthes believes in the possibility of seeing "a whole landscape in a bean." Conversely, a bean may also be examined under a whole landscape. To explain a Chinese work in the light of a Western critical model is not as interesting to a comparatist as comparing a bean to the landscape discovered in other beans.

In "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits," Roland Barthes demonstrates that there are two levels in the analysis of a novel: the narrative functions and the character. Such a division in the process of analysis can be compared to the expression and content planes in semiotic terminology. Greimas thinks that narrative writings can be compared to a simple sentence, with a structure involving a subject, verb, and object. To analyze a narrative,

the critic has to deal with its surface structure first, that is the syntagmatic patterns, and then the semantic. It is like interpreting a sentence, one must first know the relationship between the subject and object. Following V. Propp's footsteps in the analysis of narrative functions, Greimas thinks that Propp's atomistic approach in categorizing different functions can be further arranged into pairs of binary oppositions, forming a coherent pattern of narrative grammar. Unlike other structuralists, Greimas is more concerned with meaning and signification systems than with reducing a complex narrative into a few basic operations.

If there is a universal grammar of narrative, it must be because there are similar structuring activities in human perception and expression, which in turn determine (or limit) the structure of human language. The analysis of language, which reflects human ways of thinking and serves as a common structuring medium in many disciplines that involve verbal communication, is basic to the study of narrative. Put in another way, the study of narrative, like discourse analysis, is useful to many disciplines. In Greimas' scheme, every narrative consists of a subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, and opposant. These six actants form three opposite pairs. Inspired by Barthes' discovery in anthropology and French logic, Greimas thinks that binary opposition is the elementary structure of human signification systems. Thus subject is opposed to object, sender to receiver, and helper to opposant. The existence and meaning of each element in a pair is mutually dependent. If there is no object, there is no subject. Beauty exists because of ugliness; the converse is true too. So too with black and white.

Greimas believes that every narrative can be reduced to a series of functions, with subject and object in the relation of either conjunction or disjunction. So each narrative utterance may be represented as:

$$NU : F (S \cup O) \text{ or}$$
$$NU : F (S \cap O)$$

NU	= narrative utterance	O	= object
F	= narrative function	$\cup$	= conjunction
S	= subject	$\cap$	= disjunction

In every narrative utterance, there may be more than two actants, but there must be at least two.

Matrimony Inn is a little tale written in the T'ang dynasty (A.D.

618-907) of China. It was first published in *More Accounts of Mysteries and the Supernatural* (*Hsü hsüan-kuai lu* 續玄怪錄) under the authorship of Li Fu-yen李復言 (Fl. 830). No biographical information of the author is available today, except that he was a scholar and a minor government official in late T'ang. There are two extant versions of the tale. One can be found in the *T'ai-p'ing Imperial Encyclopedia* (*T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi* 太平廣記), *chüan* 159; the other in the Sung dynasty Lin-an version of *More Accounts of Mysteries and the Supernatural* (*Sung Lin-an-pen hsü hsüan-kuai lu* 宋臨安本續玄怪錄). The *Lin-an* version of *Matrimony Inn* is a more complete one, while that in *T'ai-p'ing Imperial Encyclopedia* has missing words in a number of places. The text used in this study is from the *Lin-an* version, which has an excellent English translation by Lin Yütang and is collected in his book, *Famous Chinese Short Stories*. For the sake of non-Chinese speaking reader, I will follow Lin's translation in my quotations. In *chüan* 160 of the *T'ai-p'ing Imperial Encyclopedia*, there is a similar but shorter tale, entitled *The Baby Girl of Kuan-yüan* (*Kuan-yüan ying-nü* 灌園嬰女). Although there is a slight difference between *Matrimony Inn* and *The Baby Girl of Kuan-yuan*, it is probable that they are from the same source and are only different versions of the same folk legend.

In the *T'ai-p'ing Imperial Encyclopedia*, the tale, *Matrimony Inn*, is classified under the section "Predestination – Marriage" (*Ting-shu – hun-yin* 定數・婚姻). In the same section and the one following are listed eleven more tales which are of a similar nature, showing the traditional Chinese belief that there is predestination in marriage. This reveals very much of the cultural code under which the tale was composed.

Matrimony Inn has a simple story, which revolves around the success and failure of its subject (protagonist) Wei Ku's韋固 attempts in marriage and also around the transformation he experiences in his adventures. In the light of Greimas' scheme, the actantial roles can be defined as:

Subject (S) = Wei Ku
Object (O) = a wife Wei Ku expects to marry
Sender 1 (D1) = old man (marriage god)
Sender 2 (D2) = magistrate
Receiver (R) = Wei Ku
Helper 1 (H1) = old man (marriage god)
Helper 2 (H2) = match-maker
Helper 3 (H3) = servant

Helper 4 (H4) = Wei Ku's position in the government
Opposant 1 (T1) = destiny
Opposant 2 (T2) = old man (marriage god)
Opposant 3 (T3) = match-maker
Opposant 4 (T4) = servant
Opposant 5 (T5) = the rival in Wei Ku's second match
Opposant 6 (T6) = the disease the young woman gets in Wei Ku's third match
Opposant 7 (T7) = the loose boulder that causes the death of the young woman in Wei Ku's fourth match

Some characters or circumstances in this story have more than one actantial roles. All of them, however, fall into the six-actant scheme developed by Greimas. Wei Ku as the subject of the narrative provides the motivating force for the narrative movement. Destiny as the controlling element in all human affairs is therefore the first sender that finally gives Wei Ku a wife. It determines, whether or not Wei Ku will have a wife, what kind of woman he should marry, and, most importantly, when he will marry. The old man (marriage god) is the second sender as he does the job of "tying up the feet" of Wei Ku and his predestined wife. The magistrate is the third sender, for he is the one who actually arranges the marriage between Wei Ku and his predestined wife. The match-maker, the servant, and Wei Ku's position in the government all serve as helpers to him as they help him, in one way or another, in his marriage attempts. But the match-maker and the servant are at the same time opposants because they fail to help him or even cause him trouble. As a result of his failure to kill the baby girl, the servant has left a scar on her face and hence has made Wei Ku's predestined wife less beautiful than she ought to be. The rival in the second match, the disease the young woman gets in the third match, and the loose boulder that causes the death of the woman in the fourth match are all opposants because they serve as obstacles to the subject Wei Ku's plans.

According to Greimas' procedure, narrative analysis has to proceed from sentence to sentence, but here this step, which would otherwise appear tedious to some readers, will be skipped. Instead, the narrative functions in each narrative program will be analyzed in a condensed way. The story starts with Wei Ku in the state of lacking a wife. Thus a desire in the subject is established. The narrative progresses with how the subject tries to fulfill his desire by obtaining the object. Before we analyzing the narrative structure,

narrative elements must first be distinguished from non-narrative ones. The first sentence, for instance, a qualifying statement, which describes Wei Ku's desire to have a wife, serves to give background information and is not directly related to the narrative movement.

The story is made up of a number of episodes, with the adventure and marriage plans of Wei Ku, the subject, as linking elements. In terms of its syntagmatic structure, the narrative can be divided into five programs. Narrative program one (285:3-287:32),[4] NP1, starts with Wei Ku's desire to marry. In this first marriage arrangement, a contract is established between Wei Ku, the subject, and the match-maker, the second helper (H2). The match-maker has made an appointment with Wei Ku at the temple early in the morning, but when Wei Ku arrives, he is too early and there he meets the old man, who tells him that "all marriages are arranged in heaven." (286:22) The old man further tells him a great deal about himself and his job. The long dialogue between Wei Ku and the old man can be rendered as a function of communication in which a number of qualifying statements serve to establish the fact that the old man is the marriage god. When the time of the appointment comes, the match-maker fails to show up and the old man points out that it is "no use waiting." (287:19) Destiny does not allow Wei Ku to marry earlier than he should.

In this program, NP1, the basic elements of the narrative are given: the subject's desire, the object's status, the "social contract" (which is given by the marriage god as predestination in marriage), and the subject's failure in his first attempt. The overall narrative function in this program can be summarized as NP1 : F (S n O), where O is the first woman Wei Ku wants to marry.

Destiny acts as an obstacle to Wei Ku's marriage attempt in NP1 which is realized through a human agent, the match-maker, who fails to appear. The subject's realization that there is a predestined controlling force in human affairs is important in determining the course of the subject's later action. The encounter with the marriage god brings forth the potential degradation of the subject.

Narrative program two (287:33-288:20), NP2, begins with the marriage god taking Wei Ku to the market place to see his predestined wife. In this program, the desire of the subject is to know more about his predestined wife. The program can be considered a cognitive function in the narrative movement. There is first of all a geographical displacement of the subject from the temple to the market, which is usually a marker for narrative breaks.

In the market, Wei Ku discovers that his predestined wife is a girl only three years old. His desire for her immediately turns negative. However, the old man assures him that "the child is born under lucky stars," and that she "will marry him, live in comfort, and later become a lady of high rank on account of her son." (288:6-8) The old man's assurance also serves as a qualifying statement about the baby girl's future and about Wei Ku's destiny. Wei Ku is worried because the girl is too young and he has to wait a long time for her to grow up. The narrative function in this program can be represented as NP2 : F (S n O).

This narrative program comes to an end with the subject's success in knowing about his predestined wife. The subject is given two choices in his future action: what to do with such a young girl, to wait for fourteen years and marry her, or to get rid of her so as to change his fate? It is comparable to the situation Hamlet faces: to be or not to be? An opposition is established between the marriage god's prediction and Wei Ku's determination to fight against it. It is an opposition between the divine will (predestination) and human effort. The narrative then proceeds with the struggle between these two forces.

In narrative program three (288:21-289:1), NP3, Wei Ku plans to struggle against the marriage god's prediction. He secures his servant's help to kill the girl by offering him a reward. A function of "local contract" is established between Wei Ku and the servant, who serves temporarily as a helper. The servant fails to kill the girl and only injures her face. For fear of being charged with hurting the girl, Wei Ku flees to another town. The servant serves an opposant role too as he hurts Wei Ku's future wife and leaves a scar on her face and also causes the subject much trouble. As a result of the failed murder attempt, Wei Ku becomes disappointed about marrying earlier: NP3 : F (S n O).

Narrative program four (289:2-28), NP4, begins after three years when Wei Ku again has the desire to get married. The time break is also a marker for narrative transitions. In this program, the subject attempts to marry three times, yet he fails again. The three matches are all dissolved as a result of the three chosen women who (1) commit suicide for the love of another man, (2) become very ugly after a serious illness, or (3) die in an accident after stepping on a loose boulder. The "another man," the illness, and the loose boulder all serve as opposants in this narrative program. Wei Ku's three marriage attempts are in effect repetitions of the same failure. Like the first match, they do not alter the subject's marital status. There are also

a number of qualifying statements in this program, which describe the three women's beauty or talents. As a result of failing again and again, Wei Ku is disheartened and becomes a fatalist. He accepts destiny and fights no more against it. The narrative functions in this program are repetitions of the same function of disjunction. It can thus be respresented as NP4 : (S n O).

As Wei Ku accepts destiny, the struggle between him and the divine will has come to an end. Narrative program five (289:30-290:30), NP5, begins with Wei Ku's being forced to marry the magistrate's niece. Although he is being forced, the marriage also comes up as a result of his own consent. This time he has no particular choice for his wife, yet he succeeds. Literally, the subject is "passive" in his marriage decision. But in terms of narrative movement, he is "active" in his acceptance of destiny and thus motivates the narrative. The subject's acceptance of destiny signifies the re-establishment of the "social contract," that is, the human acceptance of the divine will in marriage. His acceptance of destiny is rewarded with a wife, who later gives him a son. The narrative functions in this program can be reduced to a function of conjunction. NP5 : F (S u O). With the union of the subject and object, the narrative comes to an end.

The narrative transformations in the text follow the pattern of (initial) State-of-Being/Action/(new) State-of-Being. In the initial state-of-being, the contract of predestined marriage is established. This is a "social contract" in Greimas semiotic terminology, social in the sense of the world operating in the text: a unified heaven and earth. Affairs in the human world have to obey what is prearranged in heaven. This social contract is transgressed with the subject's attempts to struggle against it. In the transgression, the subject obtains the help of a servant and a "local contract" is established between him and the servant. One of the functions of this local contract is to transgress the social contract. This local contract can be represented as $(\frac{H3}{R = S})$, with the subject as a receiver of help. Then come three tests, in which the subject fails again. A second local contract $(\frac{D2}{R = S})$ is established when the magistrate, a helper, offers his niece to the subject. Again the subject is a receiver of help, with which he finally succeeds in marriage. The social contract of predestination is re-established when the subject submits to it. The process of narrative transformation can be summarized as:

$$\underset{(1)}{\text{Social Contract}} + \underset{(2)}{\text{Transgression}} + \underset{(3)}{\overline{\text{R = S}}} + \underset{(4)}{(\text{Test x 3})} + \underset{(5)}{\overline{\text{R = S}}} + \underset{(6)}{\text{Social Contract re-established}}$$

(1) = predestination in marriage
(2) = human effort to fight for freedom in marriage
(3) = local contract with servant helping the subject
(4) = subject fails in all three tests
(5) = local contract established, with subject accepting arranged marriage
(6) = subject's submission to destiny and thus social contract is re-established

Coincidentally, this transformation pattern maps precisely the narrative scheme Greimas discovers in French medieveal tales and some of Maupassant's stories. V. Propp's findings in Russian folk tales also conform to this scheme of narrative transformation.

While the subject's desire (human effort to obtain freedom in marriage) is the motivating force in the narrative, the social contract (predestination) is the controlling force. In the series of narrative transformations, the subject also experiences a number of changes. In the initial state-of-being, the subject's desire is caused by his lack of a wife. Destiny (social contract) determines that he has to wait for fourteen years to marry the girl. Thus destiny is a challenge to him. His decision to fight against destiny is an acceptance of challenge. A series of struggles thus arise. The transformation in the subject can be described in the following chart:

$$\underset{(1)}{\text{State of Being}} + \underset{(2)}{\text{Challenge}} + \underset{(3)}{\text{Acceptance}} \begin{cases} \text{(Success)} \\ \text{Failure} \end{cases}$$

$$+ \underset{(4)}{\text{Accept challenge}} \begin{cases} \text{(Success)} \\ \text{Failure} \end{cases}$$

$$+ \underset{(5)}{\text{Accept challenge}} \begin{cases} \text{(Success)} \\ \text{Failure} \end{cases}$$

$$+ \underset{(6)}{\text{Accept challenge}} \begin{cases} \text{(Success)} \\ \text{Failure} \end{cases}$$

$$+ \underset{(7)}{\text{Submission to destiny}} \begin{cases} \text{Success + Reward (Marriage)} \\ \text{(Failure)} \end{cases}$$

(1) = desire (lack)
(2) = destiny
(3) = subject's effort to change destiny
(4)-(6) = 3 attempts in marriage (all fail)
(7) = submission to destiny and rewarded

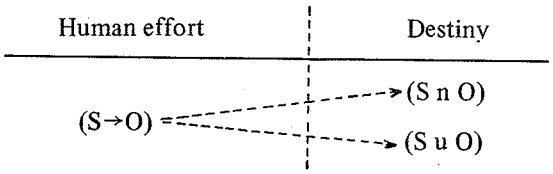
In the subject's last attempt to get married, he is both passive and active: passive because he is being offered a wife; active because he consents to the proposal. In this way, he submits to destiny by accepting whatever happens. In this case, non-action is a form of action. The transformation in the narrative subject can be further reduced to a number of basic operations:

$$\text{Motivating force: Human effort} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} (S \cap O) + (S \rightarrow O) + (S \cap O) \\ \quad + (S \rightarrow O) + (S \cap O) \\ \quad + (S \rightarrow O) + (S \cap O) \\ \quad + (S \rightarrow O) + (S \cap O) \\ \quad + (S \rightarrow O) + (S \cup O) \end{array} \right\} \text{Controlling Force: Destiny}$$

(S n O) = subject lacks object (wife)
(S→O) = subject attempts to obtain object (desire)
(S u O) = subject obtains object

Hence, there are only three basic operations in the transformation of the narrative subject: (S n O), (S→O), and (S u O). The first four attempts in marriage are only repetitions of the same operation (S→O) + (S n O). The controlling force for the occurrence of (S u O) is destiny. Victor Schklovsky, a Russian formalist, discovers that in many medieval tales the narrative transforms according to a pattern concerning the fulfilment of a prediction, which is given at the beginning of a story. This pattern can also be found in *Matrimony Inn*. The repetition of the basic operation (S n O) functions to reinforce the idea that human effort is rendered ineffectual in the face of destiny (or divine will).

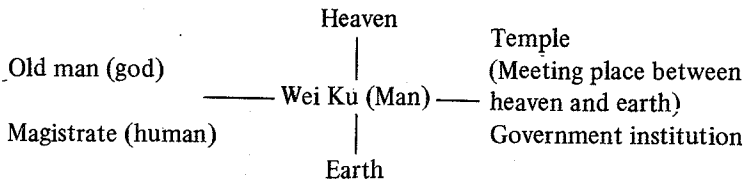
The narrative transformation in the text results from an interaction of the motivating force (human effort) and the controlling force (destiny), which can be shown in the following:



In *Poetics of Prose,* Tzvetan Todorov distinguishes two kinds of motifs: static and dynamic. A static motif does not change the situation, while a dynamic one does. In this sense, the narrative subject's first four attempts (S n O) are static motifs, whereas the last one (S u O) is dynamic.

Besides structural analysis, Greimas also deals with signification in his structural semantics. As a signification system, *Matrimony Inn* is an assembly of signs, whose semantic values (significance) depend on an interaction of the structure of the story and the interpretive code the critic adopts. In *Matrimony Inn*, the dichotomy of the two worlds, heaven and earth, in fact, forms a unified whole, in which there is a cosmic order governing the affairs on earth. Gods are divine agents that carry out the principles of heaven. Realization of the principles (or divine will) on earth also depends on harmony with man. The old man, who is the marriage god in Chinese mythology, is only responsible for tying up the feet of the predestined couples, but not for carrying the destiny out. The divine will has to be realized through the human agent. Marriage, according to the Confucian moral order, has to be arranged by parents or one's superiors. The magistrate, who is the superior of the narrative subject, can arrange the marriage for him. Only in this way is the marriage considered proper and legitimate.

The world picture shown in this tale resembles that in the Elizabethan world view, in which there is a "Chain of Being" and in which both the gods and man have their proper places and duties. If this order is violated, one is to be punished. Reward is given only to proper deeds. Wei Ku's attempt to kill his predestined wife is a violation of the divine order and he is punished with the scar left permanently on his wife's face, whereas his wife is rewarded with honor for her innocence. Wei Ku will only have what he is predestined to have. Such a world view can be shown as follows:

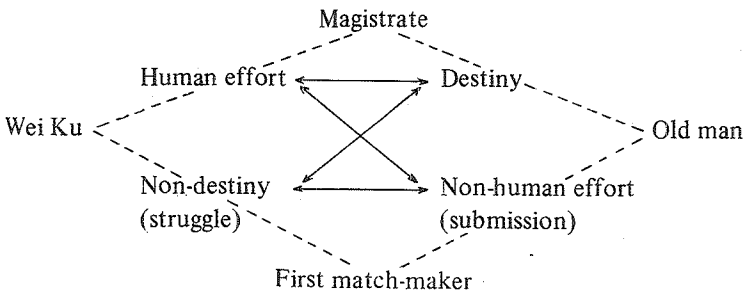


Although both the old man and the magistrate are senders, they have different levels of signification: one is from heaven, and the other from earth. While the former personifies a divine order, the latter stands for human moral institutions. Only with their combined efforts can the will of heaven be fulfilled. The temple serves as a meeting place for the pronouncement of divine arrangements, whereas the government institution is an agent to realize the divine will.

Matrimony Inn can be read as the fulfilment of a prediction. Wei Ku's fate is predicted by the old man at the beginning. As the story proceeds, Wei Ku is seen in a series of actions, struggling against this prediciton. The story ends with the prediction being fulfilled. The confrontation of two basic opposing elements, human effort and destiny, involves a number of other binary relations:

Human effort	Destiny
earth	heaven
man	god
struggle	submission
active	passive
failure	success
punishment	reward
individual	cosmic order

The narrative moves as a result of the opposition of these elements. At the semantic level, harmony rather than opposition is favored in the story. The strong moral tone in *Matrimony Inn* is also a result of this idea of harmony. A Greimasian semiotic scheme can thus be constructed to represent the basic structure of signification in the story:



Much of the symbolism in the story can be seen in this semiotic scheme. The opposition of human effort and destiny has been discussed above. The state of neither struggle nor submission occurs when at the initial stage Wei Ku knows nothing about predestination in marriage and accepts the first match-maker's arrangement for marriage. The state with both human effort and destiny working together and in harmony takes place at the end when the magistrate arranges the marriage for Wei Ku, which coincides with the divine will.

Matrimony Inn consists of a number of repetitive episodes. Although it has a simple structure, it has a complex significance. An interesting aspect about this simple story is that its pattern of narrative transformation resembles that discovered by Greimas and Propp in French and Russian tales and its structure of signification can also be described in the light of Greimasian semiotics, though its significance, which depends largely on the structure of the text, is typically Chinese.

Notes:

1. *New Asia Academic Bulletin*, 1 (1978), 1-3.
2. *Theories of Literature in the Twentieth Century* (London: C. Hurt & Company, 1977), p. 163.
3. *Michigan Germanic Studies*, 5, No. 2 (1979), 170-184.
4. Page and line numbers follow that given in Li Fu-yen, "Matrimony Inn," in *Famous Chinese Short Stories*, tr. Lin Yutang (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), pp. 295-290. For example, (285:3-287:32) means from page 285, line 3 to page 287, line 32.