
Knowledge transmission and linguistic transformation between eight-legged essay and literary creation

Weihsang Wu*¹

¹PhD student, EPHE, CRCAO – CRCAO, École Pratique des Hautes Études [EPHE] – France

Abstract

My paper aims at highlighting the influence of eight-legged essay (*baguwen*) as a defining factor in vernacular fiction creation and literary criticism. Although this factor has long been overlooked, it is in fact a decisive one, considering the dominance of the civil examination system and the fact that members of the literati class could hardly escape its influence. Constant interactions actually existed between canonic and fictional writing, between creation and criticism, between literary language and vernacular writing, and this can be revealed through numerous commentarial and editorial works, whether systematic or non-systematic. To find evidences of the influence of eight-legged essay on fictional creation, we can follow two paths. 1. The first one consists in exploring the theoretical criticism related to textual composition (*wen*, a term normally referring to writings in literary language), such as Tang Biao's (1640-1713) *Guide to reading and composing* (*Dushu zuowen pu*). In such works, many of the principles outlined for the eight-legged essay could further serve as guidance for fictional writing. This kind of theoretical writing was familiar to all members of the literati class as they were used as educational material. When members of this class set about literary creation, they naturally applied the writing technics and principles found in these works to their fictional creations. Besides, as theories, eight-legged essays were themselves a genre in constant evolution: literary theories, trends in fictional creation, all had an impact on them. 2. Another path is to look at the commentarial system (annotations, prefaces, postfaces, etc.), in which we can often find direct correlation with the theories of eight-legged essay. For example, the celebrated Jin Shengtian (1608-1661), so influential in fictional commentary and criticism, cites and develops many writing techniques that came directly from the practice of eight-legged essay. His intention in commenting fiction was in part to inspire students who were meant to participate in the imperial examination system.

This paper will address the two aspects summarised above. I plan first to give an overall view of the importance of the examinational form, in order to explain the circulation between different generic creations, then I shall discuss how the transmission and transformation of poetics are realized, relying on close reading of concrete examples. My final point is to show how the eight-legged essay fostered the transmission of poetics between different literary genres, and how it had a decidedly transformative effect on literary and vernacular languages, bridging gaps that have long been seen as separating radically distinct fields.

My name is Wu Weihsang, graduated from Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes last year with a master degree on Chinese studies, my master thesis is about the mixture of prose and poem in vernacular literature. I am now a first year PhD student of EPHE on "History,

*Speaker

texts and documents” under the direction of Mr. Rainier Lanselle and a member of East Asian Civilisations Research Centre, my thesis relates to the relation between the imperial examination system and the literary creation in Ming and Qing dynasties.