IN THE MIRROR OF THE DREAM
CAO XUEQIN, BORGES, AND THE CHINESE AVANT-GARDE
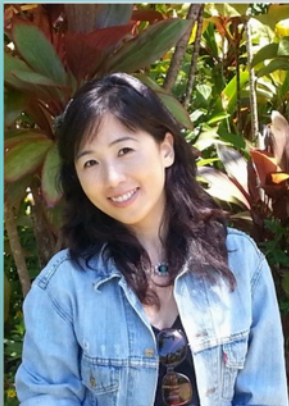
A Talk by Professor Mingming Liu, Ph.D.
UCSD Chinese Studies Program

Wednesday, April 30, 2025 @ 4 p.m.
de Certeau Room
UCSD Literature

"The Garden of Forking Paths" is a 1941 detective fiction by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. At the center of its series of enclosed narratives is a non-unilinear novel that depicts every possible narrative sequence. The philosophical nature of a book that presents the infinite bifurcation in time excites scholars of Borges, but few have realized its connection to *Dream of the Red Chamber,* an 18th-century Chinese masterpiece by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹. I argue that "The Garden of Forking Paths," hidden underneath the façade of a popular detective fiction, is Borges's metafictional interpretation of *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Considering the self-acknowledged influence of Borges among Chinese avant-garde writers, I further argue that the influence is not one-directional – it forms a Möbius strip between the East and the West. *Dream of the Red Chamber,* through its abridged translations in the early 20th-century, served as a source of inspiration for Borges's innovative use of mirrors and dreams. It returned to China after 1979 under the newly-coined name – magical realism – and inspired a new generation of writers, such as Yu Hua 余華 and Ge Fei 格非, in their adoption of metafictional techniques and circular narratives.

Mingming Liu's research focuses on zhiguai (志怪 record of the strange) in traditional Chinese literature, and its development into modern narrative forms. She is interested in the relationship between reality and fantasy – what counts as "strange" in different cultural contexts, and how the strange shapes storytelling. She received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from University of California, Riverside. She has taught at Pomona College, Williams College, and Oakland University before joining UCSD's Chinese Studies program in 2022.

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