



# Alignment and Distancing: A Review of The Construction and Communication of Mental Illness and Health Discourse in China Since Modern Times

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## Preface

For years, the mention of Li Yungeng has evoked memories of the spring of 2009, when he first introduced the works of Michel Foucault at the "NJU Journalism & Communication Reading Group." At that time, Foucault was in vogue; translations of his major works were emerging in succession, sparking intense interest among young scholars. I have long maintained that, unlike many casual admirers, Li's engagement with Foucault extended beyond mere appreciation. It was an epistemological and methodological immersion—one that influenced the faculty and

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students around him. Consequently, when I received the manuscript for *The Construction and Communication of Mental Illness and Health Discourse in China Since Modern Times*, I experienced the distinct illusion of reading *Madness and Civilization* or *The Birth of the Clinic*. Moreover, I felt a palpable sense of the painstaking effort Li dedicated to this volume.

I have known Yungeng for nearly 20 years. In 2008, while I was an in-service postdoctoral fellow at Fudan University, I taught an course on Social Psychology to undergraduates at Nanjing University. It was then that I discovered a truly exceptional cohort. After two years of study, this grade was distinct from any I had encountered: nearly thirty students demonstrated a profound interest in academic reading, with Yungeng being the most active among them. For an educator, such students are a blessing. At their collective insistence, I established the "NJU Journalism & Communication Reading Group." Unexpectedly, this group has thrived for seventeen years, remaining a vibrant incubator for academic talent to this day.

Yungeng naturally assumed the role of the inaugural Secretary-General. In my memory, Yungeng possessed boundless energy; he was animated and exuberant when sharing his reading insights. While his interest in communication texts was sparse, he had a particular affinity for philosophy—lighting up whenever Foucault was discussed. It was, therefore, a natural progression when he later enrolled in the Philosophy Department for his graduate studies. Through the students' presentations, I too acquired new knowledge. It was a quintessential experience of pedagogical reciprocity; they systematically liberated my attention from the dominance of American sociology and empirical communication research. Furthermore, Yungeng's persistent introduction of Foucault's oeuvre compelled me to prioritize Foucaultian thought in my own work.

***In The Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault—alongside Benedetto Croce and Robin George Collingwood—critiques traditional historiographical narratives.*** In Foucault's view, traditional history emphasizes the continuity or total significance of events, attempting to locate historical regularity and totality with self-satisfaction. Foucault posited that modern historical research was undergoing a paradigm shift: the reconstruction of historical discourse. This shift relegated the analysis of continuity and totality to the periphery, thereby opening new spaces for historical inquiry.

This effort to reconstruct historical discourse has generated significant consequences. It parallels the Annales School's focus on the *longue durée*, or conversely, the approach of the history of ideas, which "questions the themes of convergence and completion, and challenges the possibility of totalization."<sup>1</sup> Regardless, the rise of the *longue durée* and the history of ideas led to specific outcomes: "the concept of discontinuity assumed a prominent position in the historical discipline";<sup>2</sup> "the themes and possibilities of total history began to disappear";<sup>3</sup> and concepts such as "discontinuity, rupture, boundary, limit, series, and transformation"<sup>4</sup> were introduced into historical analysis. This transformation renders history increasingly akin to anthropology: "History is proving itself to be an anthropology... it is the evidence of millennial and collective memory."<sup>5</sup>

Foucault presented his historiography through a unique anthropological lens, consistently practicing this methodology in his own writings. When Foucault wrote history, "discourse" became his analytical pivot. "Once these forms of continuity are suspended, the entire field is opened... it is constituted by the whole of actual statements (oral and written) in their

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<sup>1</sup> 米歇尔·福柯：《知识考古学》，谢强、马月译，北京：生活·读书·新知三联书店，2007年，第7-8页。

<sup>2</sup> 米歇尔·福柯：《知识考古学》，谢强、马月译，北京：生活·读书·新知三联书店，2007年，第8页。

<sup>3</sup> 米歇尔·福柯：《知识考古学》，谢强、马月译，北京：生活·读书·新知三联书店，2007年，第9页。

<sup>4</sup> 米歇尔·福柯：《知识考古学》，谢强、马月译，北京：生活·读书·新知三联书店，2007年，第20页。

<sup>5</sup> 米歇尔·福柯：《知识考古学》，谢强、马月译，北京：生活·读书·新知三联书店，2007年，第6页。

dispersion."<sup>6</sup> These statements constitute discourse. Foucault's analysis advocates: "Grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence: determine its conditions of existence, establish its limits... and show what other forms of statements it excludes."<sup>7</sup> The meaning of discourse does not lie outside of it. In short, one must not employ the interpretative methods of secondary school literature classes to speculate upon discourse.

Foucault's method is profound; it dissolves the binary opposition between words and things. Discourse is not merely speech but a "thing"—an object and a "system of objects" available for archaeology. It is not merely representation but an objective existence with non-representational characteristics, which should not be interpreted subjectively from an external vantage point. Thus, history and archaeology converge, and the method of the archaeology of knowledge leaps from the page.

Although not always explicitly stated, Foucault's historiography, methodology, and research themes constitute the background and keynote of Li's work. Foucault was so fixated on mental illness that he used it as the primary example of discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. In this book, Li begins his inquiry with the Hui'ai Hospital and extends it to field research at the Guangzhou Likang Center (established in 2000), resolutely combining historical writing with anthropological research through the lens of "discourse." This is a sophisticated compositional strategy; historical and contemporary empirical materials are constructed seamlessly, reflecting the author's high degree of theoretical sensitivity—a feat Foucault himself did not fully achieve in all his works.

The monograph's most brilliant insights appear in the second and fifth chapters. In **Chapter 2**, "Missionary Psychiatric Medicine and Hui'ai Hospital," Li details the history of the hospital from its founding to its incorporation by the Nationalist Government in 1935. To establish a foothold in China, Hui'ai Hospital creatively invented practices of "moral treatment," "physical

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<sup>6</sup> 米歇尔·福柯：《知识考古学》，谢强、马月译，北京：生活·读书·新知三联书店，2007年，第27页。

<sup>7</sup> 米歇尔·福柯：《知识考古学》，谢强、马月译，北京：生活·读书·新知三联书店，2007年，第28页。

restraint," and "spatial medicalization." It proposed a discourse of "moral treatment" to distinguish itself from the "immoral abuse" characterizing the traditional Chinese family-centered model. However, Li does not interpret this merely as a rhetorical success; he links it to the political exigencies of China's transformation from empire to modern nation-state. The interaction between the government and Hui'ai Hospital suggests that these medical practices offered Chinese rulers a vision of new social governance—a feasible pathway for integrating individuals and enforcing public order.

**In Chapter 5**, "Discourse on Pluralistic Governance in the Community Mental Rehabilitation Model," Li presents field research involving social workers at the Guangzhou Likang Family Resource Center. Through vivid dialogue, he reveals the contestation over mental illness discourse. To me, the most compelling aspect is the struggle between social workers and psychiatrists. After a century of development, psychiatrists have secured absolute professional jurisdiction over diagnosis and treatment, yet they have not achieved total hegemony in the discursive field. Social workers employ moral discourse to compete with psychiatric professional discourse, thereby gaining legitimacy in community rehabilitation. Li's success here lies in his recording of "living" dialogues and his analysis of the subtext, forming a brilliant analysis of discursive action. Consequently, the text becomes dynamic and narrative-driven, in some sense surpassing Foucault, who never utilized such methods to write his history of ideas.

However, applying Foucault's archaeology is no easy task. Mapping the relationships between discursive events across different levels requires vast amounts of material from diverse media carriers. Foucault himself faced criticism from historians regarding his selection of data. **Chapters 4 and 5** of this book inevitably suffer from a scarcity of such discursive materials. They rely too heavily on professional journals as empirical sources rather than living discursive events. Discussing the professionalization of medical discourse and health communication requires more than analyzing the *National Medical Journal of China*; it demands an analysis of pluralistic events across various media—actions, stories, and conflicts. When only media texts remain as the object of analysis, the layering and tension present in other chapters fade. The reader encounters fragmented discourses, but due to the lack of broader historical data, the

explanation of how psychiatrists secured jurisdiction—and the power relations behind it—remains limited.

How did Foucault avoid this pitfall? His success did not lie in the method itself, but in the presence of a powerful, unifying conclusion running through his texts. His aphorisms—"knowledge is power," "panopticism," "omnipresent discipline"—resonate far more than his archaeological method. Foucault creates the illusion that his conclusions stem from discourse analysis, yet he likely would have reached them without it. He did not truly practice his archaeological methodology, nor did he successfully regulate the relationship between discourse-as-words and discourse-as-things. His success stemmed from powerful intellectual archetypes, not the methodology he claimed to employ.

Li's book reveals the "ceiling" of discourse analysis. Discourse unveils parts of the social context but conceals others, including organizational modes and dynamic mechanisms. Researchers of discourse rarely ask: *In unconcealing something, what does Foucault's method conceal?* Meanwhile, non-representationalists and media phenomenologists are addressing this. Outside discourse, there are "things," non-representational elements, and mysterious media spaces. Boris Groys noted that outside the symbolic space lies the media space: "The media carrier constitutes complex layers and interconnected structures—a huge, stuffed sub-medial space (*untermedialer Raum*), yet the eyes of those who want to observe the movement of signs... cannot capture the structure of this space."<sup>8</sup> Groys criticized theoretical emptiness based solely on discourse, advocating that any serious media theory must "inquire into the nature of the sub-medial space... and thereby transcend the post-structuralist theoretical empty talk."<sup>②9</sup> Indeed, discourse is not everything; much meaning resides outside the observation of discursive events.

Foucault, discourse, text, objects, media—these are vital aids in a researcher's intellectual growth. We must study them with reverence. However, a scholar must cautiously align with

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<sup>8</sup> 鲍里斯·格罗伊斯：《揣测与媒介：媒介现象学》，张芸、刘振英译，南京大学出版社，第29页。

<sup>9</sup> 鲍里斯·格罗伊斯：《揣测与媒介：媒介现象学》，张芸、刘振英译，南京大学出版社，第31页。

them, yet distance themselves when necessary. To "distance" is to transcend Foucault and the confines of discourse; this is the ultimate tribute to the master. Without alignment, we lack a theoretical foundation; without distancing, we remain in the shadow of giants. Only through distancing can we dialogue with masters in the interval between theory and experience. In this sense, *The Construction and Communication of Mental Illness and Health Discourse in China Since Modern Times* excels in alignment, but is only beginning its journey of distancing. for contemporary Chinese scholars, alignment is insufficient; we must distance ourselves, and young scholars especially need this resolve and vigor.

## **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.