

# Rethinking Modern Chinese Literature in a Global Context

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**A**lthough Chinese and Western comparatists know that modern Chinese literature is an integral part of world literature, its study has been confined mainly to sinological circles.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Western literature has enjoyed an enthusiastic reception in China, modern Chinese literature is known to few scholars or lay readers in the West.

To many Western readers (and to some Chinese readers as well), modern Chinese writing suffers from its derivative Westernization. Because of the lag common in cross-cultural contact, the Chinese products of Western influence seemed dated by the time they reached the West in translation. Introduced more or less simultaneously with nineteenth-century Western realism and Romanticism leavened with traditional Chinese literary and cultural conventions, Chinese writers throughout the twentieth century wavered uncomfortably between the imitation of reality and the imitation of an ideal (McDougall and Louie, 447). Whereas classical Chinese literature developed almost independently of Western influence, modern Chinese literature drew heavily on it. This special issue is the first overview of twentieth-century

<sup>1</sup> One exception is David Damrosch's insightful book *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), which touches on modern Chinese literature in translation. On modern Chinese literature as the whole see Bonnie S. McDougall and Kam Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

Chinese literature to restore it systematically to a broad cross-cultural and global context.

As China's involvement with the international community has grown closer, major Western literary scholars have become increasingly interested in Chinese literature, both classical and modern.<sup>2</sup> This issue features two of them: Douwe Fokkema, who started his academic career as a sinologist and diplomat in China, and J. Hillis Miller, who has visited China frequently and has lectured at most of the leading Chinese universities. In the current age of globalization, modern Chinese literature has been more and more colored with the characteristics of world literature in an attempt to be counted among the exemplars of world literature.<sup>3</sup> The two high tides of this "overall Westernization" (*quanpan xihua*) should be dealt with at the outset.

Western sinologists and Chinese scholars agree that classical Chinese literature developed almost autonomously yet exerted considerable influence on neighboring, especially Japanese and Korean, literatures. But while European countries advanced swiftly after the Renaissance, Chinese culture and literature were for a long time marginalized, largely because corrupt, inefficient feudal and totalitarian regimes isolated the country from the outside world. For Chinese literature to regain its lost stature, Chinese literary scholars argued, it would have to identify itself with Western cultural modernity and modern Western literature. Consequently, they called for the large-scale translation of Western literary works into Chinese. A famous neologism of Lu Xun was "grabbism" (*nalai zhuyi*), that is, the habit of grabbing anything useful to the Chinese. A program of extensive translation rapidly brought a century of Romanticism, realism, and modernism to China and profoundly influenced its literature, which by the twentieth century stood at the threshold of modernity. Translations promoted

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Gayatri Spivak has taken courses in Chinese at Columbia University since 2002 and even spoke some Chinese at the ceremony marking her honorary appointment as guest professor of Tsinghua University on March 7, 2006, and J. Hillis Miller declared in a lecture at the same university on September 5, 2003, that "if I were twenty years younger, I would start from the very beginning to study Chinese."

<sup>3</sup> On the development of contemporary Chinese literature under the Western influence see Wang Ning, "Confronting Western Influence: Rethinking Chinese Literature of the New Period," *New Literary History* 24 (1993): 905–26.

the internationalization of Chinese literature, which came to have a new look. Largely under the Western influence, Chinese literature has formed a new tradition in dialogue with its classical past as well as with modern Western literature.<sup>4</sup> In this issue Sun Yifeng, a scholar of translation studies and modern Chinese literature, deals with the role of translation in forming the modern Chinese literary canon. Although some domestic scholars fault translation for promoting overall Westernization, even colonization, it has more conspicuously promoted decolonization.<sup>5</sup> Granted, since Western discourse dominates the orientation of world literature, the movement of Chinese literature toward the world implies, like the westward globalization of economy and culture, a degree of Westernization. But in this process national culture might prove either strong or weak; it interacts with globalization in a sort of glocalization. If we overemphasize Westernization while overlooking a reciprocal reaction from the West, we cannot grasp the orientation of contemporary world culture and literature precisely, let alone periodize or even reperiodize modern Chinese literature.

The reperiodization undertaken in the present collection of essays differs from all other domestic and foreign studies of modern Chinese literature. Here the modern period is considered to have started with the May Fourth Movement in 1919, not only because of the movement's political significance but also because it marked the most open time in the twentieth century for Chinese literary, cultural, and intellectual life. During this period Chinese literature began to show a consciousness of totality and internationalization; it lost its character as an isolated phenomenon and joined the sphere of world literature. Indeed, the May Fourth Movement anticipated China's enthusiastic involvement in late-twentieth-century (economic) globalization—the second overall Westernization.

Only during the May Fourth period, when such Western thinkers as Schopenhauer, Bergson, Nietzsche, and Freud were fashionable among

<sup>4</sup> On the formation of the modern Chinese literary tradition see *Modern Chinese Literary Tradition* (*Zhongguo xiandai wenxue chuantong*), ed. Center for Modern Chinese Literature Studies, Nanjing University (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> See Wang Ning, "Translation as Cultural '(De)colonization,'" *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 10, no. 4 (2002): 283–92.

intellectuals, did the first overall Westernization peak.<sup>6</sup> So today's comparatists and scholars of translation studies may well view the translated Western literature of the time as an undifferentiated part of modern Chinese literature, for many modern Chinese writers were more strongly influenced or inspired by foreign writers than by their own literary tradition.<sup>7</sup> Experimental techniques and devices from Western modernist and avant-garde writers permeated Chinese writers' creative consciousness and unconsciousness and became part of their practices. In this issue these innovations are the subject of essays by Ming Dong Gu, Li Tonglu, Chengzhou He, and Alexander C. Y. Huang on the modern period and by Chen Yongguo on Chinese poetry into the 1990s.

The end of the modern period should be regarded as coincident with the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 rather than with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.<sup>8</sup> After 1976, and

<sup>6</sup> Freudianism had a tremendous influence on twentieth-century Chinese literature; conversely, different versions of Freudianism emerged from the Chinese context. For detailed discussion and analysis see my article "The Reception of Freudianism in Modern Chinese Literature," pt. 1, *China Information* 5, no. 4 (1990): 58–71; pt. 2, *China Information* 6, no. 1 (1991): 45–54.

<sup>7</sup> Lu Xun frankly admits that "when I began to write stories, I did not realize that I had a talent for writing fiction. For at the time I was staying in the guesthouse in Beijing, where I could not write research papers, as I had no reference works; nor could I do translation, as I did not have even the original texts at hand. In this situation, what I could do was to write something like fiction. Hence *The Diary of the Mad Man* came out. When I wrote this piece, I depended only on some hundred foreign novels or stories I had read and some knowledge of medicine I had obtained. As for other preparations, there were none" ("How I Started to Write Fiction," in *Collected Works of Lu Xun* ["Wo zenme zuo qi xiaoshuo lai," in *Lu Xun quanji*], vol. 4 [Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1989], 512). The novelist Yu Hua even more frankly declares that "when writers of our generation started to write, what influenced us most was translated novels. Classical Chinese novels influenced us much less, let alone modern [Chinese] novels. I always think that the construction and development of a new Chinese language owe the greatest debt to those translators, who have found a middle way between Chinese and foreign languages: they have expressed in Chinese the spirit of foreign literature, but they have also enriched Chinese itself" (Yu Hua and Pan Kaixiong, "A Dialogue on New Year's Day," *Writers* ["Xinnian diyitian de duihua," *Zuojia*], no. 3 [1996]: 6).

<sup>8</sup> On this periodization of modern Chinese literature see my article "Globalizing Chinese Literature: Moving toward a Rewriting of Contemporary Chinese Literary Culture," *Journal of Contemporary China* 13, no. 38 (2004): 53–68.

especially after 1978, when Deng Xiaoping rose to power, came the second high tide of openness in—that is, the second overall Westernization of—Chinese literature. Thus the first overall Westernization was characterized by a sort of modernity and the second by a sort of post-modernity, but we cannot separate the latter totally from the former. Despite the huge difference between the modern and the postmodern, even in the Western context, postmodernism retains close connections with modernism. In China this relationship is acutely apparent. “New Period literature” (*xinshiqi wenxue*)—a political designation for works published from 1976 to the end of the 1980s—features a number of cultural and aesthetic codes rather than a single dominant one. Modernist elements are mixed up with postmodern, avant-gardist, and even realist elements. By engaging in dialogue with the literatures of all countries, especially those of the West, therefore, contemporary Chinese literature is striving to join, if not to stand out among, the ranks of world literature.

Internationally, especially in Western literature and culture, the postmodernism debate of the late 1950s and early 1960s witnessed a shift in preeminence from North American cultural and literary circles to European ideological and philosophical circles. Parties to the debate were aware, either clearly or vaguely, that literary modernism had been on the decline since World War II. As a new episteme or cultural dominant, postmodernism had displaced modernism. But in China imported postmodernism assimilated elements of other movements, especially those of a Chinese-inflected modernism. Fokkema’s essay discusses Chinese postmodern literature in detail by focusing on the works of Mo Yan, Yu Hua, Wang Shuo, and Han Shaogong. Cultural modernity as a project of enlightenment was in a profound crisis, as it was challenged by postindustrial postmodernity and then, in the late 1980s, suffered the backlash of globalization. When postmodernism came to China in that decade, it produced new literary and cultural trends. As a historical discourse, globalization has bridged the discourses of modernity and postmodernity. Thus the entry of Chinese literature into the contemporary period precisely coincides with the internal logic of its development. No longer isolated, Chinese literature now possesses unique grandeur and appeal in the forest of

world literatures.<sup>9</sup> Sheldon H. Lu's essay deals with a significant concomitant phenomenon, the rise of "beauty writing" (*meinü xiezuò*) as a consequence of cultural globalization and consumerism. China is one of the few countries to benefit greatly from globalization not only economically but also politically and culturally. The rapid development of the Chinese economy has enabled the Chinese government to set up hundreds of "Confucius Institutes" worldwide for the purpose of promoting Chinese language and culture. As it experiences "depovertization" (*tuò pínkùn huà*) and "de-Third Worldization" (*qū dīsān shìjiè huà*), China is changing from a "theory-consuming" country into a "theory-producing" country. To be regarded as objective or comprehensive, a comparative history of world literature in any language must take into account modern Chinese literary creation, theory, and criticism.

Chinese literature is now in a post-New Period, which is increasingly market-oriented. David Der-wei Wang, one of the most insightful sinologists, sums up the tendencies: "Writing in a postmodern era, Chinese writers have come to realize that writing does not have to be equated with political action and that literature cannot solve all social problems, as Lu Xun's successors expected it to. Writing now becomes a facetious gesture, a playful action, that titillates rather than teaches, flirts rather than indicts."<sup>10</sup> The post-New Period poses a set of challenges to the cultural dominant of the New Period: (1) The radical experimentation in the latest writing opposes and deconstructs the humanistic depth of the New Period. The self-evidence of one's humanity is lost, and literature becomes ever more formalist. Many texts not only run counter to traditional aesthetic principles but mock and parody the modernist aesthetic; some even fall into the impasses of anti-interpretation, antiform, and anti-aesthetic, particularly the "trans-avantgardist" verse following the fall of "Obscure" poetry (*menglong shi*). (2) The new realist fiction not only is a strong reaction to the avant-garde but also transcends the traditional realist aesthetic.

<sup>9</sup> See Jie Lu, *Dismantling Time: Chinese Literature in the Age of Globalization* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> David Der-wei Wang, "Afterword: Chinese Fiction for the Nineties," in *Running Wild: New Chinese Writers*, ed. David Der-wei Wang with Jeanne Tai (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 254.

In compromising with the reading public, it highlights a sense of commonality (*pingmin yishi*) at the start of the twenty-first century. Like the attempt at “crossing the border and closing the gap” in early American postmodernism, the aesthetic of the new realist fiction narrows the gap between elite and popular literatures. (3) Commercialization puts at risk the unique quality of elite literature. Popular literature devoted to so-called *petites histoires*, media literature, Internet literature, TV series and films, reportage, and journalism have entered an age of pluralism and Bakhtinian “carnivalization” outside the mainstream. That is, since the 1990s popular literature and culture have largely superseded serious literature and elite culture in the marketplace. (Western postmodern literature and culture, having run a similar course, are already in decline.) We are witnessing both the summing up of a past age and the turn to a new age.<sup>11</sup> So the present is only a transitional period that will come to an end once its task is complete.

Gu’s essay reevaluates the fiction of Lu Xun, who anticipated both modernism and postmodernism although he had no direct contact with his Western contemporaries: “Under Western literary influence, Lu Xun reconceived the nature and function of literature inherited from the Chinese tradition and made repeated experiments with literary techniques and style in his creative writings.” Inspired by Jean-François Lyotard’s vision of postmodernism, Gu shows how Lu Xun’s reception of modernist and postmodern doctrines produced a “homemade” modernist with some postmodern elements in his writings. “Lu Xun’s self-conscious concern with new forms and styles is a hallmark of modernism,” yet he exhibits “many postmodern features” through his “radical blending of literary forms and styles.” He mixed genres and collapsed temporal boundaries “among past, present, and future” as well as ontological boundaries “among the human, natural, and supernatural worlds.” Since Lu Xun “absorbed . . . protomodernist techniques as well as thematic elements without himself consciously acknowledging them, it

<sup>11</sup> Zhang Yiwu, an influential avant-garde critic in China, has advanced a new concept, “new century literature” (*xin shiji wenxue*), to describe the development of Chinese literature at the beginning of the twenty-first century. See his article “The End of ‘New Literature’ and the Start of New Century Literature,” *Frontiers of Literary Theory* (“‘Xinwenxue’ de zhongjie yu xin shiji wenxue,” *Wenxue lilun qianyan*) 3 (2006): 241–73.

is perhaps fitting and proper to call his avant-gardism a homemade modernism.” While Lu Xun wrote largely under an acknowledged Western influence, therefore, his literary practice anticipated the modernist and postmodern experimentation in Chinese literary creation.

Among major modern Chinese writers, Lao She is one of the most “national,” writing in a distinctive idiom inflected with a Beijing dialect. But even so he had a lot of foreign experience; as Huang points out in this issue, Lao She “was quite unusual for the amount of time (over a decade) he spent outside China.” This theme in his writings has not been substantially studied. Linking him with current diaspora studies, Lao She’s study-abroad experience hybridizes Chinese identity while bringing China closer to the outside world. As Huang indicates, some of Lao She’s novels and short stories dramatize the dialectic between the global and the local and ask “whether we can refuse to be defined by the local, either by birth or by acculturation.” His representations of the cross-cultural dilemma can be thought of as “double-voiced.” To Huang, “The problem with these cultural go-betweens is not their betrayal of their ethnicity but their inability either to contextualize foreign commodities . . . or to internalize the mode of thinking of another culture.” In this sense, studies of Lao She’s works should deal with their cosmopolitan elements as signs of his anticipation of both “glocalization” and diaspora.

In the absence of a long theatrical tradition, studies of modern Chinese literature usually focus on fiction or poetry. But one aspect of modern Chinese thought and drama has long attracted both intellectuals and drama scholars: the influence of Ibsen. In the early twentieth century the spread of “Ibsen fever” led the influential journal *New Youth* (*Xin qingnian*) to publish a special issue on “Ibsenism.” After Lu Xun had initiated a debate on what was to be done after Nora left home, numerous Chinese Noras and “leaving-home plays” (*chuzou xi*) were produced. In this issue He makes a careful study of modern Chinese drama by referring to the role played by Chinese women. It is largely Ibsen’s influence that gave China its spoken drama and many of its modern dramatic works. “A large number of Chinese plays and stories,” He notes, “were written with Nora as their model. Nora became a symbol of individualism and women’s liberation.” Portraits of liberated women gave way to spectacles of women’s defeat by patriarchal



tradition. In this sense “the rethinking of modern Chinese plays has come to suggest that women are heroines of Chinese modernity.” The centenary of Ibsen’s death in 2006 caused another outbreak of Ibsen fever in China, but this time audiences seem more interested in the playwright’s visionary works like *Ghosts*, *Peer Gynt*, and *The Master Builder* than in his “social problem plays.”

Li’s essay illuminates how Irving Babbitt’s New Humanism traveled to China and was transformed in the Chinese context. New Humanism reached Chinese intellectuals largely through the efforts of Wu Mi, Hu Xiansu, Mei Guangdi, and Liang Shiqiu, who all studied at Harvard University and either were Babbitt’s protégés or were inspired by his thoughts, which they saw in relation to Confucianism. As Li richly shows, New Humanism spread into Chinese theory and literary practice but faded when its universalist and transcendental claims lost touch with the historical context. Yet while New Humanism has long since passed into history in China, it continues to have some resonance as a plea for a “humanistic spirit” in contemporary literature and culture, which have fallen under the sway of postmodern consumerism.<sup>12</sup>

Almost all textbooks on contemporary Chinese literary history deal with the literature of the Seventeen Years (1949–66) either too briefly or too critically, as if it were beneath serious consideration. Scholars outside China do pay attention to these “Red classics” but view them as Communist propaganda. In this issue Yomi Braester focuses on three films in the political campaign genre. Yet genres can reflect ideological variations within a common aesthetic, and Braester’s analysis convincingly demonstrates the gulf separating the “proto–Cultural Revolution context” and “antirevisionist values” of *Serfs* from the Great Leap Forward frugality and struggle of *Sentinels under the Neon Lights*. Although the Red classics that Braester analyzes have little influence on today’s film production, they reveal complex currents in an era often thought devoid of artistic significance.

<sup>12</sup> A heated debate on the crisis of humanism was launched in 1995 by a group of Shanghai scholars centered on the journals *Shanghai Literature* (*Shanghai wenxue*) and *Reading* (*Dushu*), published in Shanghai and Beijing, respectively. Dissatisfied over the rise of popular culture and the prevalence of postmodern theory in academic circles, these scholars tried to recover the old humanistic spirit by implementing something like a new humanism. But the debate came to nothing.

It is well known that Chinese poetry flourished during the Tang and Song dynasties and, centuries later, made its way to the West, where it strongly influenced Anglo-American imagist poetry. Since the modern period, however, Chinese poetry has been heavily influenced by Western poetry, which helped drive the rise of a modernist group in China. Chen's essay traces the history from the May Fourth period to the present. To Chen, many Chinese poets are themselves translators of Western poetry. With their strong creative sense, they aim not to reproduce the originals but to re-create them. Chen's accounts of the Nine Leaves poets and of the Obscure group remind us how, even in the age of globalization, when elite or serious literature has been severely challenged by consumer culture and literature, poetry continues to enrich cultural and intellectual life.

Modernism and postmodernism coexist in the Chinese context. As Fokkema shows in this issue, they are as often allies as competitors. Surveying writers of varying cultural backgrounds and domestic and international intellectual roots, he illuminates how Chinese postmodernism is largely a "hybridized" product of Western influence, the domestic tradition, and other elements. In this sense "no literary text is 100 percent modernist, or postmodernist." Fokkema's open vision of "international" or "global" postmodernism not only deconstructs the monolithic version of (Western) postmodernism but also paves the way for contemporary Chinese literature to be immersed in and integral to mainstream world literature.

As David Der-wei Wang predicted in the early 1990s, Chinese writers since then have shown a tendency to "play" or even "flirt" with literature, or to regard literary creation as nothing more than "writing the Chinese characters" (*xiezi de*). This tendency has become stronger and more challenging to serious or elite literature, in which beauty writing has become increasingly conspicuous. In this issue Lu deals with beauty writers who are themselves beautiful women and who chiefly publish on the Internet: "The phenomenon of beauty writers is symptomatic of some more profound changes in Chinese literature, culture, and society. This type of literary work signals the reemergence of urban literature based in cosmopolitan Shanghai, the shift from national literature to globalization, and the changing role of the writer in Chinese society." What accounts for these phenomena? Certainly,

consumer culture has challenged elite culture and literature in China. Everything, including sex, can be “consumed,” and everything serious and lofty has been mocked and even deconstructed. “Gone,” writes Lu, “is the libidinal economy of scarcity, deficit, and austerity. Also gone is the notion of ‘pure literature.’” Although his radical views might arouse controversy, they show us that Chinese literature since the turn of the twenty-first century has taken on a panoramic scope that should attract our attention and academic study.

Obviously, this special issue on modern Chinese literature is by no means intended to rewrite the history of modern Chinese literature, but collectively the essays may enable the non-Chinese reading public to see a clear historical development in Chinese literature from the beginning of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first. If they do, I will be pleased.

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