

Worlding Literary History of Modern China

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Abstract:

In the “Preface” to the newly-edited *A New Literary History of Modern China* published by Harvard University Press in 2017, David Der-Wei Wang put forward a new “beginning” of modern Chinese literature. As one of the new “starting points,” he offers the year 1635 when the Confucian scholar cum Catholic convert Yang Tingyun (1562-1627) and the Italian Jesuit missionary and scholar Giulio Aleniset (1582-1649) redefined *wenxue* according to concepts inherited from both Jesuit doctrine and classical Chinese learning in the late Ming Dynasty. Prof. Wang is inspired by Martin Heidegger and applies his coined term “Worlding” to the interpretation of Chinese literature, which is the study of modern Chinese literature not only “with” but also “in” the point of view of the world; at the same time it is also the study of the “modern aesthetic significance” of modern Chinese literature with the language, style and literary performance in the “worlding.” It can be seen as a new interpretation of modern Chinese literature and will have a profound impact on future studies.

Keywords: David Der-Wei Wang, *A New Literary History of Modern China*, modernity, “starting points”, “Worlding”, *wen*, *shi*

A great history must be a literary history.¹

Shen Congwen / David Der-Wei Wang

David Der-Wei Wang edited *A New Literary History of Modern China* published

1 See discussion in Wang, David Der-wei. *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Chinese Intellectuals and Artists through the 1949 Crisis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, Chapter 3.

by Harvard University Press in 2017. It won't be long before the publication of the simplified Chinese version. This volume encompasses a spectacular collection of articles contributed by 143 scholars of the United States, Europe, Asia, mainland China, and Taiwan. With its wide spectrum of topics and thought-provoking statements and assertions, the comprehensive evaluation of this work still remains to be seen. My focus will dwell on Prof. Wang's "Preface" which is the integration of ancient and modern perspectives, the combination of Chinese and foreign sources, the interweaving of the perpendicular and horizontal dimensions. With "rethinking the conceptual framework and pedagogical assumptions that underlie the extant paradigm of writing and reading literary history," (Wang 1) the "Preface" will certainly invite more dialogue from now on. Upon my initial reading, I was impressed by the following parts: the questioning of May 4th, 1919 as the beginning of the history of modern Chinese literature, the new interpretation of literary modernity in China, the theoretical elaboration of "worlding literary China" and the interesting discussion of texts of different genres as literary discourse, all of which signify the demonstration of this book as a new way in opening up of the domain of discourse for the discussion of modern Chinese literature.

Literary history contains a comprehensive understanding of professional scholars in the same field for the literature within a given period. Therefore, it is necessary to define the beginning and the length of the period, which reveals the nature of it. It is also necessary to define the dimension of the space, which is usually within the national boundary in the modern era. The length of modern Chinese literature is not very long, roughly one hundred years, but it's full of fierce conflicts and considerable controversy defining its nature. In a sense, the period and nature of modern Chinese literature are defined by Chinese contemporary literature. Since Chinese literature after 1949 is defined as "the literature of New China" with specific political implications, the literature prior to that must assume a name defined according to the arrival of the new era. Obviously, because of the connotation and nature of the history of Chinese contemporary literature, modern Chinese literature has been assigned the significance of the origin of modernity with its anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism and provided the necessary logic continuity for the socialist revolutionary significance of Chinese contemporary literature. Because of the radicalization of modernity between the 1950s and 1970s, especially due to the influence of the extreme left wing, the connotation of the definition of modern and contemporary Chinese literature is somewhat narrow without recognition of its richness and diversity. In 1985, Huang Ziping, Chen Pingyuan and Qian Liqun first proposed the concept of "Chinese literature of the twentieth Century" (Huang 3)

with an attempt to diagram the history of modern Chinese literature in a more holistic perspective of time. This concept will undoubtedly integrate the contemporary with the concept of “modern” in contrast to the integration of the modern with the concept of “contemporary” in the 1950s and 1960s before the cultural revolution. In application of the modern enlightenment to the literary historical narration, the term “twentieth century” is adopted to unite the “contemporary period” with the “modern period” as a whole. In the construction of “socialist literature” since 1949, “world literature” was regarded as the bourgeois literature and was totally rejected. The proposal of the concept of “Chinese literature of the twentieth century” was an attempt to place Chinese modern literature in the context of world literature as well as to embrace it with the modern world as a standard and ideal reference. Chen Pingyuan later explained: “When we put forward ‘Chinese literature of the twentieth Century’, it is different from other claims such as ‘The Hundred Years’ Chinese Literature (1840-1949)’, ‘The General History of Modern and Chinese Literature’. It is not only a division of literary history, but also a grasp of the history of Chinese Literature in the twentieth century as an inseparable organic process, which involves the establishment of a new theoretical model.”(Chen 4)

Later, Chen Sihe and Wang Xiaoming in Shanghai put forward the idea of re-writing the literary history in 1988, which was obviously under the influence of the study of modern Chinese literature abroad, such as Xia Zhiqing’s *The History of Modern Chinese Fiction*. Of course, the reformation and innovation of modern thoughts in the 1980s in China brought forth a direct impact. The change of the trend was the demand of the times; therefore the change of the compilation of the history of literature was no exception. Since the 1990s, the publication of the history of modern Chinese literature and the history of Chinese contemporary literature in mainland China burst forth in an endless stream. According to statistics, there are no less than 70 books, however with few breakthroughs. Along with the discussion of “Modernity” in Chinese academic circles, the domain of the discourse of the history of modern Chinese literature has also rapidly expanded its theoretical connotation and aesthetic perspective, among which Prof. Wang’s “repressed modernity” is, among others, undoubtedly the most challenging and inspiring one. It shook the Chinese convention of the narration of the literary history once again after Xia Zhiqing’s *The History of Modern Chinese Fiction*. Xia’s contribution lies in the highlight of the forgotten and the neglected writers while Wang’s is to re-establish the standards of modernity. With the new connotation of modernity rewritten by the literature of the late Qing era, the significance of modern and contemporary literature in China completely changed.

If the publication of *Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction* was Prof. Wang's partial rewriting of modern Chinese literature in his personal style, then his edition of *A New Literary History of Modern China* is the comprehensive rewriting. In *Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction*, Prof. Wang attributed the decadent tradition, the spectacular fantasy, the refined sentimentalism and the diversified tastes to the clues of aesthetic modernity at the beginning. The used-to disregarded failure and leftover so became the origin of modernity, which expresses, in Baudelaire's term, the heroic will of time in the fleeting, ephemeral experience. The aesthetic modernity is quite different from, even contrary to, the dominant force later defined as modernity of social history. Therefore it seems that the late Qing era is not necessarily the origin of modernity, rather there exists only the repressed modernity for a long time. For an extended period of time scholars in the Chinese academic circle have not been aware of Wang's ambition that Chinese modernity has a more profound and broad origin, a self-generated one. So, what is modernity? Whose modernity? They all become new issues.

For a long time we have neglected to ask: since modernity is "repressed," then when is the origin of its generation? Obviously, there is neither "origin" nor "center" according to deconstruction. But still our imagination of history cannot be repressed by the deconstructive strategy. There must be a beginning and an end of the existence as in the case where astrophysicists have never given up the exploration of the origin of the universe. Artificially or arbitrarily, there must be a "starting point" of the modernity of China. History without a "starting point" is unimaginable as well as incomprehensible. Now with the publication of *A New Literary History of Modern China* we suddenly realize that the "repressed modernity" has been lurking as the mysterious loong with concrete head and tail over a long history of two or even three hundred years. Many years ago, Ouyang Jianghe wrote in a poem entitled "Fashion Shop":

.....Are you fascinated about the feet of stitches?

Or the scheme of rhymes? Sichuan embroidery, or the embroidery of Hunan? With leisure

Not always recalling with an idle pen. The love about the south of the Yangtze River

Is foreshadowing like palindromes waiting for you in the north: peach blossoms outside

the stitches of plum blossoms inside.(Tr. Zheng Che)

With poetic diction skillful enough to stitch the history, the culture and the mood of the time together, the rhetoric of the poem is impressive and the charm of it is delicate. Of course, the content and style of the poem is a little sentimental and elaborate, which may not be a suitable analogy for such a grand and challenging academic effort of Prof. Wang. Besides, Prof. Wang will not agree with my choice of the adjectives such as “elaborate” , “grand” and “sentimental” to describe his “repressed modernity.” What I want to highlight is the literary expression of Prof. Wang in his theoretical exploration.(Chen 201-202) The literary charm, especially the fascinating classical charm, is what is lacking in my engagement of literary criticism in China and deserves my sincere praise. Of course, Prof. Wang’s literary criticism is not lacking in vigor and tenacity with implicit strength of character. Indeed, I can feel Prof. Wang’s concern and worry with his fusion into the research of the history of modern Chinese literature. His handling of the complicated issues of the history of modern Chinese literature with ease is the best evidence of his strength of will as a leader among his peers. With courage and determination, he spent more than 10 years guiding no less than 150 scholars of different countries to complete this masterpiece with the breadth and depth of history, which is the embodiment of Prof. Wang’s firm and indomitable spirit. Though its academic contribution should be left to fuller evaluation in the future, this work is undoubtedly worthy of respect for its extremely laborious and time-consuming efforts.

Indeed, the most challenging as well as controversial opinion of *A New Literary History of Modern China* is that it traces the “starting point” of literary modernity back to the year 1635, “when the Confucian scholar *cum* Catholic convert Yang Tingyun (1562-1627) set to redefine *wenxue* according to concepts inherited from both Jesuit doctrine and classical Chinese learning.”(Wang 20) “Finally, we look forward in time through visions of the future”(Wang 21)with “the science fiction writer Han Song (1965-)'s *2066: Mars over America*.”(Wang 33) *A New Literary History of Modern China* “is intended for readers who are interested in understanding modern China through its literary and cultural dynamics. At the same time, it takes up the challenge of rethinking the conceptual framework and pedagogical assumptions that underlie the extant paradigm of writing and reading literary history.”(Wang 1)

This proposal of the “starting point” of Chinese literary modernity is undoubtedly bold, for it challenges the concept of Chinese modern history, modifies the modern transformation of Chinese history and opens up a new domain of discourse in the discussion of Chinese modernity. This is the earliest proposed “starting point” of the origin of the modernity of literature in China. Sporadic arguments that the modernity of Chinese literature originated in the late Ming Dynasty are not un-

common, but it is the first time to rewrite and rename Chinese modernity on such a large scale. The argument about the origin of modernity in China is also derived from the various disputes of the origin of Western modernity. The intellectual origin of Western modernity is usually marked by the rise of the French Revolution and the European Enlightenment in the late eighteenth century. The social origin of Western modernity comes from the globalization of commercialism, the emergence of the industrial revolution and the formation of the metropolis as the center of social activities. But many researchers have traced the germination of modernity back to the “longue durée” of the sixteenth century (1350~1650) proposed by the Annals School with Fernand Braudel as its leader. The end of the sixteenth century marked the beginning of the great navigation, and the British East India Company was founded in 1600. In 1640, the British parliament passed The Grand Remonstrance, which is usually regarded as the beginning of modern world history. Obviously, this year could be regarded as “the origin of modernity.” However, this is not the earliest year to mark the beginning of the modernity of the West. Some scholars in modern theology are willing to locate the beginning of modernity from theological sources. Michael Allen Gillespie identified the origins of modernity in the late Middle Ages in *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. Another more famous view came from Toynbee, who saw 1475 as the beginning of modern times, and 1875 as the beginning of the turmoil of postmodern times. Obviously, Prof. Wang’s identification of 1635 as the beginning of Chinese modern literature is really a clever choice. It is five years earlier than the beginning of the history of the modern world. These five years are very important, for in this case the origin of Chinese modernity is neither outside that of the world nor influenced as the other by Western modernity. It is not in accordance with Oswald Spengler’s observation that the willing man leads the fate while the unwilling man dragged away by it. China has its own destiny, and Chinese literature has its own strength! In this book Prof. Wang moved the location of the origin of Chinese modernity back to Chinese history, which is a dialogue between China and the West, and it demonstrates China’s vision and embrace of the world. Of course, the conversion of Yang Tingyun to Christianity is not in accordance with authentic Chinese tradition, even beyond the boundaries of the orthodox. But if it were viewed as the Chinese first meeting with the world with an open mind, it would be a different story. Isn’t the discovery of the world, to discover the wider humanity as well as to discover the progress of human communication, the most fundamental connotation of modernity? In 1617, just a few years before 1635, Jin Ping Mei (Chinese: 金瓶梅, translated into English as *The Plum in the Golden Vase* or *The Golden Lotus*) was published and is now known as the earliest mod-

ern Chinese novel. At the beginning of fifteenth century, the population of China was about sixty million, while in the sixteenth century it reached 150 million, but it declined sharply around 1644. Therefore there are pros and cons for the choice of 1635 as the beginning year of Chinese modernity. In 1640, which was regarded as the starting point of the modern world, Britain was involved in the struggle between parliament and monarchy that lead to the defeat of the king. Apart from that, around 1635 China is still suffering the political darkness full of corrupted officials, deteriorating with the widespread famine full of destitute people because of an abnormal cold spell. The situation does not change until 1644 when the Manchu army conquered Beijing through the strategic fortress Shanhaiguan and began the Manchu rule of the northern nomadic people over the central plains of China with the dominance of the Confucian culture for thousands of years. However, the modernity of the late Ming Dynasty can be regarded as a very dynamic and fascinating domain of discourse, especially in the cultural and aesthetic sense.² In this way the origin of modern Chinese literature is no longer in simple opposition to the modernity of May 4th, or that of the enlightenment, but to seek the primary source from China itself. The proposal that Chinese tradition generates modern culture takes up the challenges of the concept of a “world system” by Immanuel Wallerstein---the diffusion from the core to the edge to challenge. It is undeniable that this breeding is no escape of the influence of the world, for example, the introduction of Christianity, the great discovery of geography, the influx of silver as well as the beginning of international trade. Since I haven’t read the book, the above comments are my comments on Prof. Wang’s choice of 1635, whose significance in the discussion of the modernity of Chinese literature or the origin of modern Chinese literature is undoubtedly a very challenging and controversial point of view.

In fact, Prof. Wang did not just arbitrarily decide on this year, nor did he seek the social and historical source for literature’s “modernity.” He did provide multiple entries for the discussion about the origin of modern Chinese literature, which enable the coexistence and accommodation of many choices of timing. In his view, the late Ming Dynasty is just one of the options, for at that time the concept of “literature” coined by Yang Tingyun out of the collision between western classical ideas introduced by Christian missionaries and traditional Confucian poetics is very similar to that of literature in the modern sense. Additionally, Prof. Wang borrowed from the previous related discussions of some famous Chinese scholars, such as Zhou Zuoren

2 Some scholars have discussed the decadence of the late Ming Dynasty, which can be regarded as one of the aesthetic features of modernity. See Tuo Jianqing. “Dacendent Aesthetic Style and Chinese Modernity in the Late Ming Dynasty”.

and Ji Wenfu, who respectively, from the perspective of humanism or from a revolutionary standpoint, traced the beginning of modern Chinese literature to the new literature in the seventeenth century. Prof. Wang points out:

As such, the “beginning” of modern Chinese literature suggests both a moment of genesis and a retroactive discovery. Another possible beginning point is 1792. That year witnessed two apparently unrelated events: Lord George Macartney’s (1737-1806) diplomatic mission to China, and the publication of Cao Xueqin’s (1715-1763) novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. However, when juxtaposed, the two events shed new light on each other. Whereas the Macartney mission (1792-94) raised the problems and promises of modernity, particularly of foreigners in the central kingdom, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* created a world that encapsulated late imperial Chinese culture at its height, one that signals the beginning of the ending of a civilization; hence the rise of anticipatory nostalgia.(Wang 20)

The year of the publication of *Dream of Red Mansions* is just another possible beginning. Prof. Wang did not deny the year 1919, which was “recognized” in the mainland China as the beginning of Chinese “modernity.” Obviously, at present in the academic circles of the mainland, few people persist in the idea that “May 4th” marks the beginning of modern China, for in that case there would be the serious reduction of the domain of discourse of Chinese modernity, which is not welcomed by the large number of researchers in this field. In fact, if the beginning of modern Chinese literature is no longer decided from political history, but from the perspective of a modern interpretation of historical, literary and aesthetic concepts, it is undoubtedly wise and constructive to open the scope of timing. Of course we need to discuss and clarify the historical and theoretical presuppositions. In any case, the proposal put forward by Prof. Wang offers a new starting point in research.

There is another important view in the “Preface” worth noting, that is, when he explains his modern Chinese literary thoughts he emphasizes the concept of “worlding.” If the choice of the year 1635 is to modify the origin of modernity of Chinese literature from the point of view of time, then “worlding” is to reexamine modernity from the point of view of space. Instead of the influence of Foucault, the proposal of the concept of “worlding” indicates Martin Heidegger’s influence. The verbalization of the word “worlding” is implicit for Heidegger while it becomes explicit in Prof. Wang’s application. In Heidegger’s view, the world is constructed and exists eternally in a constantly shifting state of becoming. Prof. Wang quotes that

“worlding” is a complex and dynamic process of ever-renewing realities, sensations and perceptions through which one incessantly works to access “the Open of the world.”(Wang 17) From this point of view, “Modern Chinese Literature,” as a thing “present in its thinging from out of the worlding world.”(Wang 17) Its existence is free outside of our naming with its own origin, which allows Prof. Wang to adjust the starting point. This echoes Husserl’s idea---Go back to the thing itself. Since the most important starting point of modernity is to return to the thing itself, to maintain the initial state of things, to maintain the heart of history, people can certainly go back to a far earlier origin. Isn’t there a possibility that modernity beginning in 1635 is a more authentic date? On the other hand, “modern Chinese literature” is a thing named after many perceptions and is called to becoming in the worlding. Obviously, Heidegger’s discussion of “worlding” is in the sense of existentialism, which is the unity of the four worlds of the sky, the earth, the God and the human. Prof. Wang did not fall into Heidegger’s speculative philosophy. Otherwise things can not be realized and the authenticity of modern history can not be proved in this sense. What lie in Prof. Wang’s mind is things in the “worlding” and things in history. “Worlding” is not a state of things coming into the world by themselves, but in the historical conditions. Prof. Wang writes:

“Worlding” describes the conditions of being-in-the-world in relation to the foregrounding and evolvment of things as such. The conditions are less fixed essences than conduits of differences between verbal, written, and mental concepts. According to Heidegger, it is poetry that brings the world and things together in a topology of being, “gathering into a simple onefold of their intimate belonging together.”As discussed above, *wen* points to a multitude of artifacts, locations, or encounters that manifest the world over time. *wen* is not a sign so much as an articulation of the meaning of the world through a set of correlating ideas, objects, or doings.(Wang 18)

“Worlding” in history is “being” in the sense of empiricism and materialism. In the study of modern Chinese literature, Prof. Wang does not simply borrow Heidegger’s thoughts, but instead carries on the “creative” transformation. He regards “worlding” as the aesthetic expression of the transformation of Chinese literature from ancient to modern times. The hidden effort is to distinguish the modernity of Chinese literature from that of western literature. Clearly, Prof. Wang is very cautious on this issue, only touching upon it without further elaboration. In addition to “the dialectic of truth versus fiction” as the drive of western modernity, Prof.

Wang holds “modern Chinese literature implants itself at every level of human experience, forming an ever-amplifying orbit of manifestations that are imaginatively evoked and historically embedded.”(Wang 22) In the process of the literary representation of the changes in the world, the literary mind drives or generates various forms, genres to record itself, the world, the life experience in all aspects as well as the beliefs, which is the extraordinary significance of China’s literature entering into modernity.

Prof. Wang’s concept of modern Chinese literature is not limited to the traditional genres. He pays much attention to diversified ones, manifesting the rich spirit, emotion and soul of modern China: “The mutual illumination between *wen* (literature) and *shi* (history)” is what underlies Prof. Wang’s editorial vision. He stated passionately,

“How to reflect the dialogue between *wen* (literature) and *shi* (history), or history of poetry in a narrow sense in Chinese tradition remains a central concern of *New Literary History*. Through the essays, I intend to configure a world in which literature of myriad attitudes, styles and levels, is brought to bear on history, and history is similarly brought to bear on literature [...] The purpose of each essay is to elicit the historical significance of that event, as represented through literary texts or experiences, be it in terms of its particular circumstances, long-term relevance, or its contemporary resonance or dissonance.”(Wang 11)

Out of the longing for modernity of Chinese literature, Prof. Wang made the largest possible planning in the “worlding” for modern Chinese literature, which has four dimensions: architectonics of temporalities; dynamics of travel and transculturation; contestation between *wen* and mediality; and remapping of the literary cartography of modern China.

Obviously, *A New Literary History of Modern China* opens up the domain of discourse of modern Chinese literature in the following four aspects: the origin of modernity, the diversity of literary genres, the highlight of the literary mind, the mapping of literary cartography. Many aspects of the book will arouse the great interest of the academic community and inevitably trigger fierce debates, such as the broad theoretical scope, the rich diversified expression, the sharp individualistic interpretation, the novel weird resources, etc. In the discussion of the modern Chinese literary world, there has been no exciting topic for a long time except for some malice which has done harm instead of construction. *A New Literary History*

of Modern China is a more profound rewriting, which rewrites not only the modernity of Chinese literature but that of China with such a close linkage between the literature, the history and the history of ideas. It is the writing of the “consciousness of the present” that highlights what has been buried or forgotten in the past and explodes “the continuum of history” and “historical materialism.”³ Its significance is self-evident: to what extent Chinese modern experience promotes or changes the global spread of modernity? In this sense, *A New Literary History of Modern China* is seeking a more independent and renewed spiritual history for Chinese literature, as well as for Chinese culture in the world and in the modern process of globalization.

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3 This is inspired by Walter Benjamin “To put to work experience with history—a history that is originary for every present—is the task of historical materialism. The latter is directed toward of consciousness of the present—which explodes the continuum of history.” Walter Benjamin. *Selection Writings*. eds. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 262.

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