

## Contemporary Chinese Fiction in the Context of World Literature

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**Abstract:**

As we know that modern Chinese fiction formed its unique tradition largely under the Western influence or inspired by world literary masters. In this sense, we should say that Chinese literature is part of world literature. But unfortunately, largely for lack of excellent translation and critical discussion and promotion, modern Chinese fiction is not so well known outside of China. Actually there have appeared quite a few excellent Chinese novelists in the contemporary era. Apart from the Nobel laureate Mo Yan, Jia Pingwa, Yan Lianke, Liu Zhenyun, Yu Hua and Ge Fei are the best of these contemporary authors. Their excellent works should be viewed as part of world literature, which should not be neglected by either comparatists or by those engaged in the studies of world literature. Even in the face of the challenge of high technology and internet, fiction still exists and is appreciated by quite a few readers and scholars.

**Keywords:** modern Chinese fiction; contemporary; world literature; globalization

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When we discuss contemporary Chinese literature, we cannot but deal with world literature, especially Western literature, as modern Chinese literature formed a unique tradition under its influence. The same is even truer of contemporary Chinese fiction although China does have its own tradition of fiction like that of poetry.

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Unlike the case of classical Chinese literature, in which poetry once ranked the top among all literary genres, fiction in the history of modern Chinese literature has always been dominating literary production and circulation, ranking the top among all the genres. Also, fiction always attracts the critical and scholarly attention both in China and elsewhere. It is a widely recognized major literary genre that has long been practiced in a “glocalized” Chinese context although it has been largely influenced by its Western counterpart. Thus it has the quality and qualification to have equal dialogues with both its traditional precursor classical Chinese fiction as well as its Western counterpart. In this sense, I think it absolutely necessary to start with the very intriguing theoretical concept world literature, in the context of which we could discuss contemporary Chinese fiction in a historical and critical way.

### **Modern Chinese Fiction as Part of World Literature**

Modern Chinese fiction has been viewed most open to the outside world, for during the period of 1919-1949, if we accept the old periodization of Chinese literature, all the major Western literary currents, academic thoughts and cultural trends flooded into China through large-scale literary and cultural translation. After that time, till the late 1970s when China started opening up and practicing economic reform, Chinese literature was almost isolated from the outside world. While domestic literary historians always call Chinese literature of that period, till the present era, as contemporary literature, I try to cross the artificial border between the modern and contemporary periods, viewing Chinese fiction of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as modern fiction while viewing the fiction in the new century as contemporary one. Although some overseas sinologists have done substantial research on the fiction writing of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I think it still far from enough. I always think that even the periodization of modern Chinese literature is somewhat problematic. So now it is necessary for me first to re-examine modern Chinese literature from a global and theoretical perspective as it has always been under the Western influence since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or more exactly, after the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement

in 1919 when a new Chinese literature started in a completely different direction, moving gradually toward the world and merging with the mainstream of world literature. Obviously, among all the literary genres, fiction has played a vital role in flourishing modern Chinese literature. Thus I view modern Chinese fiction as part of world literature, or more exactly, world fiction.

As a matter of fact, the traditional writing of modern and contemporary Chinese literary history has a fatal shortcoming, that is, those politically oriented literary historians always identify literary history with political or ideological history, thus neglecting the internal logic and law of development of literature and culture proper. The two high tides of the modernist movement in 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese literature have evidently proved this. So I simply combine the two periods as an “expanded” modern period, including all the literary phenomena since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. But my emphasis is chiefly laid on contemporary fiction writing. Furthermore, some of my discussions even point to the fiction writing of the new century.

As is well known, Chinese literature has a long history with splendid cultural and aesthetic heritage. But along with the swift development of the West after the Renaissance, Chinese culture and literature were for a long time “marginalized”. Upon entering the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese literary scholars have more and more realized this “marginalized” position that Chinese literature has in the broad context of world literature. That is why they called for large-scale translation of Western literary works, mostly translation of Western novels, and cultural and academic thoughts viewing this as the best way of getting China out of the isolated state. Undoubtedly, such an effort made to translate Western literature, especially Western novels, did promote the process of internationalization or globalization of modern Chinese literature, making Chinese literature of this period have a different look from its literary tradition, farther and farther away from its tradition and closer and closer to world literature.

It is true that only around the May 4<sup>th</sup> period did such an “overall Westernization” reach its high tide although Lin Shu (1852-1924), Liang Qichao (1873-1929), Lu Xun (1881-1936), and Hu Shi (1891-1962), had already called for translating as much as possible Western literature and cultural and theoretical trends before that time. Among all the translated literary works, fiction occupied the largest amount. That is to say, modern Chinese fiction has developed almost completely under the Western influence, according to Lu Xun whose fiction writing is especially indebted to his reading of some hundred foreign fictions plus a limited knowledge of medicine (Lu Xun 507). The two Nobel laureates writing in Chinese are largely influenced by their Western masters: Gao Xingjian (1941-) is most indebted to the

theatre of absurdity and existentialist philosophy and literature as he himself was a French literature major while studying in the university, and Mo Yan (1955-) has been most inspired by two of his modern and postmodern Western masters: William Faulkner and Garcia Marquez. The novel writing technique and various new devices practiced by the Western modernists, postmodernists and historic avant-gardists have permeated in Chinese writers' creative consciousness and unconsciousness, becoming part of Chinese writing techniques and creative practice.

The same is true of many other modern Chinese writers. They would rather admit that they were inspired by Western literature than by traditional Chinese literature. This is also one of the important reasons why some conservative scholars severely criticize the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement for starting a sort of cultural "colonization" and linguistic "Europeanization". But today's scholars of modern Chinese fiction, no matter what attitudes they might take toward the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement, will probably not be suspicious of it as the beginning of modern Chinese literature, especially fiction writing.

### **Modern Chinese Fiction in the Context of World Literature**

It is said that Goethe put forward his concept "Weltliteratur" under the inspiration of a Chinese fictional work as well as some of Indian and Persian literary works. Although the Chinese work *Hao Qiu Zhuan* (*Hau Kiou Chooan*) Goethe had read as the first Chinese novel,<sup>1</sup> as well as some other Chinese literary works of minor importance, is far from being viewed canonical Chinese literature, it still inspired him to put forward his utopian conjecture of "Weltliteratur":

I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men....I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach (quoted in Damrosch 1).

Obviously, Goethe here uses poetry to refer to all the literary genres. But unfortunately, Goethe had not got access to better Chinese novels like *Honglou Meng* (*A*

1 This is the first Chinese novel of gifted scholars and beautiful ladies (written by Mingjiao Zhongren sometime in the 18<sup>th</sup> century) in the modern sense, whose first English translation done by Thomas Percy as *Hau Kiou Chooan* in 1761, and then by John Francis Davis as *The Fortunate Union*.

*Dream of Red Mansions*) and others, or he would have been even more astonished at the remarkable achievements made by eminent Chinese novelists. Due to the fact that Chinese literature before the 19<sup>th</sup> century was seldom influenced by literatures of other countries, but even so, China still had close relations with the world. Chinese people in the ancient time even viewed their country as the “Middle Kingdom” (zhongyang diguo), and China was also called the kingdom of poetry as the Tang poetry was most flourishing in the history of Chinese literature, while in Europe it was still in the “dark” Middle Ages. But unfortunately, due to the later rulers’ inability to govern the country well and corruption, it was not long after that China became a second-class feudal and totalitarian country. As compared with Chinese poetry, Chinese fiction is much less important in the history of classical Chinese literature. But it still inspired Goethe, and the concept “Weltliteratur” was first theorized by him with the help of his reading and dynamic understanding of Chinese fiction.

But unfortunately, Chinese literature has long been “marginalized” on the map of world literature. Domestic scholars usually think it a matter of translation. But I hold that apart from inefficient translation there are other factors to prevent Chinese literature from being circulated and popularized in the world. In this aspect, the current situation of book market is by no means good. We can easily find that contemporary Western literary works and those of humanities are largely available in Chinese translation and sold extremely well. But books of the similar titles authored by Chinese writers or scholars can hardly be circulated so well overseas. Sometimes, the Chinese authors or humanities scholars have to apply for funds to pay the publication expenses. So today’s young people do admire Western thinkers and writers much more than their Chinese counterparts. I think there are some reasons behind this phenomenon.

First of all, due to the prevalence and ideological intervention of Orientalism, Western audience has some long-lasting bias against the Orient and Oriental people, including China and Chinese people. To many of them who have never been to China, the country is both poor and backward even now far from a civilized country. Thus Chinese people are uncivilized far from the elegance of Western people. Since they are not well-educated and civilized enough, how could they produce excellent literary and humanities works?

The second reason might be the disability and absence of excellent translation. As is known, foreign language teaching in China has been a big educational enterprise out of which great profits are made by quite a few publishing houses. But the fact is that most of the Chinese college students and teachers, including those

of the English major, can only read English books or newspapers and have simple daily communications with native English speakers. Thus very few of them could translate Chinese works into excellent and publishable foreign languages, especially into excellent English.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, even when they have translated great Chinese literary works into English or other major foreign languages, their versions are either not appreciated by native speakers for the foreignizing elements or unable to be circulated in the target book market.

Here I just take the two English translations of *Honglou Meng* (*A Dream of Red Mansions* by the Yang couple, and *The Story of the Stone* by David Hawkes et al.) for example.<sup>3</sup> Judging by the linguistic faithfulness, the former is much better, but judging by readability and elegance, the latter is far more elegant. As Chinese literary scholars and translators, we should solve the problem of how to effectively translate excellent Chinese literary works into elegant and idiomatic English so that these works could reach the broad reading public in the English speaking countries.<sup>4</sup>

The third reason lies in this paradox. We now live in a postmodern consumer society, in which serious literature and other high cultural products are severely challenged by the rise of popular culture and consumer culture. Since classical Chinese literary works of high aesthetic quality are far from the reality of the current consumer society, they may not be attractive to contemporary readers even if English translations are available. As far as modern Chinese literature is concerned, since it has largely been developed under the Western influence, it can hardly be compared to its Western counterpart even when translated into English or other major foreign languages.

Last but not least: the position of modern Chinese fiction on the map of world literature also depends on the critical and scholarly studies of it. The publication of C.T. Hsia's *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (1961) has made tremendous influence on both overseas studies of modern Chinese literature as well as on the

2 In order to change this biased attitude, I edited a special issue at the invitation of *European Review* and published in the journal. The special issue is titled *Rediscovering China: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (co-edited with John Aldrich). Cf. especially my "Introduction," *European Review*, 23. 2(2015); 173-179.

3 *A Dream of Red Mansions*, trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, 4 vols. (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2001), first published in three volumes in 1978-1980; *The Story of the Stone* (the first eighty chapters translated by David Hawkes and last forty by John Minford, Penguin Classics or Bloomington: Indiana University Press, five volumes, 1973-1980).

4 Cf. Wang Ning, "Zhongguo wenxue ruhe youxiao di zouxiang shijie?" (How Could Chinese Literature Effectively Move toward the World?), *Zhongguo yishu bao* (*China Art Gazette*), March 19, 2010.

scholarship of mainland China and Hong Kong and Taiwan after its being translated into Chinese. Although we might not agree with Hsia's radical critical comments on some of the Chinese writers and their works, his book has after all promoted modern Chinese fiction in the English as well as international sinological world. But such eminent sinologists are indeed very few. Therefore we need more research works on this topic without which we cannot make modern Chinese fiction known to the broad international reading public. Let alone make it occupy a place on the map of world literature.

### **Present-day Chinese Fiction and World Literature**

In discussing contemporary Chinese fiction in the context of world literature, we should first of all redefine contemporary Chinese literature. Unlike most of my Chinese colleagues, I always think that contemporary Chinese literature should start from the end of the Cultural Revolution in the year 1976, because as I have mentioned above that modern Chinese literature, especially fiction writing, formed under the Western influence. So we usually say that there was an "overall Westernization" in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century till the 1920s. And after 1976, especially after 1978 when Deng Xiaoping became the actual top leader of China's party and state and China started the economic reform and opening up, there appeared the second high tide of "overall Westernization", in which Chinese literature has been more and more open to the outside world in an attempt to move toward the world and become part of world literature. In this aspect, Mo Yan's Nobel Prize winning marks the real beginning of contemporary Chinese literature's moving toward the world and becoming part of world literature. But Mo Yan is only one of the many eminent Chinese novelists whose literary achievements could be viewed as important as his. Since I have discussed Mo Yan elsewhere (Wang 2013, 2014), I will, in this section, just briefly discuss several other best known Chinese novelists who have a wide international reputation and who are most promising to become the future Nobel laureates.

Yan Lianke (1958-), as one of the best known contemporary Chinese novelists after Mo Yan, is also regarded as the most promising candidate for literary Nobel Prize largely due to his wide international reputation and influence among both domestic and overseas scholars and critics. From March to April 2014, he delivered several lectures at about ten North American universities, including Harvard, Yale, Duke and UC Berkeley, where various activities were held in honor of him. Although he has won lots of domestic literary prizes, it is since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century that he has been increasingly well known and having a wide international reputa-

tion. Like Mo Yan, Yan Lianke has been influenced by modern Chinese literature but more profoundly influenced by modern and postmodern Western literature. But unlike Mo Yan, Yan Lianke has a stronger consciousness of theory with a burning interest in and profound attainment in Western literature and literary theory. He once said very frankly that he likes such Western literary masters as Kafka, Faulkner and Garcia Marquez so much so that he especially appreciates their masterpieces like “The Metamorphosis,” *The Castle*, *The Sound and the Fury* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. That is, although he became well known very late, yet from the very beginning of his writing career he aimed very high: not only writing for domestic readers, but also for readers of other countries and linguistic and cultural environments. Thus he deals with the fundamental issues concerned with all the people in the world. And only in this way has he produced excellent works of allegorical significance and aesthetic value. Although he is regarded by the critical circles as a “master of the absurd realism,” he does not care for this designation. But to my mind, it is correct that the contemporary Chinese critical circles usually think that Yan is particularly good at creating various absurd and even surrealist stories. These stories usually have absurd plots and comic characters full of parodic and black humorous colors. Readers could laugh at their absurd behaviors but express implicit sympathy toward them, for they are nothing but victims of the society. Since he admires Kafka so much so that he even imitates his style in a creative way, he has finally won the Kafka Prize as a reward. In response to the critical view that Yan’s works are full of absurd and unbelievable plots, he says, “It is not that my works are absurd but life proper is full of absurdity.” Western readers and literary critics cannot but think of what Samuel Beckett responded to his French readers on the similar occasion. But Yan echoed his French master in the Chinese context, which indicates how close his works are related to world literature.

But on the other hand, the stories Yan Lianke tells, like what are told by Mo Yan, have exclusively happened in China and full of Chinese elements. Through his idealistic imagination and superb depiction, these fragmentary stories are of universal significance, easy to be understood by readers of other countries or cultural and linguistic environments through translation. Like his Chinese precursor Lu Xun who sharply criticized the evil character of Chinese peasants of the Republican period, Yan even more profoundly criticizes the evil sides of contemporary Chinese peasants who want to be rich at the expense of selling their blood. So it is not surprising that Yan is often compared with Lu Xun apart from being compared with Kafka, his Western precursor. What is more, critics have also found some utopian idealistic tendency in his writing. That is, he has a burning desire to create a land

of idyllic beauty without suffering, which is obviously a cosmopolitan ideal. All the above characteristics of his fiction writing are easily recognized and understood by his Western readers and critics. That is why his fiction has attracted the critical and scholarly attention of American academia being viewed as among world literature. As we all know that one of the most important principles formulated by the Nobel Committee is that the candidate should have written excellent literary works of “idealistic tendency”. We should say that in the current postmodern society known as consumer society, commercialization dominates people’s life and work, and literature is often reported to be “dead”. Those who once had strong interest in literature cannot but complain that the present world is becoming more and more realistic with less and less idealistic sentiment. Under the impact of commercialization, literary market has been increasingly shrinking. Today’s young students would rather read online popular works than spend much time in the library reading canonical works. One often hears such a question: What is the use of studying literature as well as humanities? Despite all the above, Yan Lianke still maintains his elite literary position and produces one work after another and teaches literary criticism in an elite university. I do think that his devotedness to literary creation and high culture will sooner or later be rewarded like his colleague Mo Yan.

Yu Hua (1960-) is probably the most influential and best known contemporary Chinese novelist, only next to Mo Yan, or as well known as Mo Yan from an international point of view, with his important works translated into English, French, German, Russian, Italian, Dutch, Norwegian, Korean and Japanese. His writing has also long attracted the critical and scholarly attention, especially from overseas sinologists. In the mid-1990s, I was invited by the international journal of postmodern studies *boundary 2* to write an introductory article to its special issue on postmodernism and China, I, in discussing the metamorphosed versions of Chinese postmodernity, spent some space discussing Yu Hua although he was at the time a newly rising Chinese avant-garde novelist of postmodern tendency (Wang 1997). Another prestigious American journal of comparative literature *Modern Language Quarterly* also published an article discussing an important novel of Yu Hua (Liu 2002), which is very rare in the English speaking world. Although Yu is younger than Yan, he became well known earlier than the latter. Early in the 1980s, Yu Hua had already published short stories or novelettes in almost all the leading Chinese literary magazines and was regarded as one of the most representative novelists in contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction, which according to me is one of the postmodern versions in Chinese literature (Wang 1992). Zhang Yimou’s adaptation of his novel *Huozhe* (To Live, 1993) has certainly expanded Yu Hua’s

international reputation and influence. It has promoted his novel of the same title in both domestic and international book market. In addition, Yu Hua's work has also received a number of international awards, including literature and art Knight Medal of France and some prestigious literary prizes in Italy and Australia as well as many other domestic and international literary awards due to his superb fiction writing.

In April 2004, when I was visiting Duke University, I was invited by my friend Fredric Jameson to participate in his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday party at his home. To my surprise, Yu Hua was also invited. And Jameson paid particular attention to Yu's literary creation comparing his writing with that of Lu Xun's.<sup>5</sup> If we say that most of the well-known Chinese writers only attract the critical attention of the sinologists, Yu Hua, is one of the very few contemporary Chinese novelists who have attracted the scholarly attention of Fredric Jameson, a leading Marxist theorist and literary scholar in the West. No doubt Yu Hua was influenced by modern Western literature from the very beginning of his literary career. In one of his personal letters to me on September 16, 1990, he openly declares that he is more influenced by modern and postmodern Western literature than by Chinese literature. He said that he was very grateful to those Chinese translators who have produced excellent translations of the best foreign literary works. But he thinks that if a writer wants to write an excellent work of eternal value he cannot but suffer from "loneliness" devoting to writing like Kafka and Joyce (Wang 1992: 147). To him, the literary works that have most strongly influenced and inspired him are not those of classical Chinese literature, let alone modern Chinese literature, but rather, those (Western) world literary masters. Yu said openly,

[W]hen writers of our generation started to write, what influenced us most were 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 the Chinese language itself (Yu and Pan 6).

As compared with Mo Yan and Yan Lianke, Yu Hua is not so productive, but he is particularly good at a narrative of delicateness and subtlety. He often uses pure fine

5 Since Yu Hua's oral English is not so good, I served as an interpreter when Jameson talked with him.

narrative, breaking the daily language order, organizing a self-contained system of discourse, which is very appropriate for scholars to analyze from a narratological perspective. In addition, his works also construct one after another strange, bizarre, hidden and cruel textual worlds which are independent of the external and real world, to achieve the verisimilitude of the literary text. These characteristics are easily recognized that his writing has been influenced by his Western postmodernist masters. Today's literary critical circles think that Yu Hua's works in the 1990s are different from those produced in the 1980s, which find particular embodiment in his masterpieces like *To Live* and *Xu Sanguan Maixue Ji* (*Xu Sanguan Selling Blood*, 1998) and which are closer to life proper. He, with a plain folk attitude, shows a kind of indifferent attitude and persistence of power, providing another method of historical narrative. Among Yu Hua's literary themes, we surprisingly find that he seldom writes about love, but death is one of his important and frequently written themes. He often describes death in a cold and indifferent tone like his Western precursor Earnest Hemingway.

Jia Pingwa (1952-) is a typical author of all the eminent contemporary Chinese novelists whose writing has the most remarkable local flavor. That is, his works are colored with most striking national characteristics, and even his narrative language has a striking northwestern characteristic and strong accent, with dialects appearing now and then in his works, which are thought of untranslatable. Even so, it does not prevent his works from being circulated well in international book market. His works have so far been translated into some ten languages and made considerable influence among overseas literary scholars. He is best known for his novels like *Fuzao* (*Impetuous*, 1987), *Feidu* (*Deserted City*, 1993) and *Qinqiang* (*Qinqiang Opera*, 2005), for which he has won such prestigious literary awards both at home and abroad as the Mobil Pegasus literary award bronze (*Impetuous*), the French Femina Prize for Literature (*Deserted City*), the *First Dream of the Red Mansions* award and the seventh Mao Dun Literary Prize (*Qinqiang Opera*). Jia is believed to be one of the very few contemporary Chinese literary geniuses, with most rebellious and creative spirit and extensive influence. He is also one of the very few Chinese novelists who could be recorded in the history of Chinese as well as world literature with his unique and outstanding literary achievements. He started his literary career as early as in the 1980s, but it was the publication of his *Deserted City* that brought to him both great reputation and controversy. Critics generally think that Jia's writing is both traditional and modern, both realistic and lofty, with his language sincere and honest, and his heart full of towering waves. These are undoubtedly reasons why his works have such massive force. His works, characterized by microscopic

narrative and meticulous detailed description, successfully depict the true state of ordinary people's daily life, and the changes in rural China faced with contradictions and confusion, full of affection of description and interpretation of pure feelings. There is no noise and commotion under his pen, but hidden in the sad, lively behind, is the loneliness.

*Qinqiang Opera* is generally regarded as his masterpiece, but it also has the most striking national characteristics of all his works. Jia, through the evolution and change of a so-called Qingfeng Street during some twenty years, describes a sort of mortal illness and death, joys and sorrows of the fate, and vividly recreates the shock and changes in the history of China's social transformation. His narrative perspective is very unique. With delicate plain language, the novelist writes in a "dense fleeting way" about the profound changes in the traditional pattern in the era of reform and opening up and the rural values, and interpersonal relationship. Between the lines he devotes a deep feeling to and thinking about the rural status brought about by the social transformation to his hometown. Coming from the Northwest Plateau, Jia makes his works full of local flavor, and even the language filled with striking national characteristics. It is just these nationalist characteristics that have paved the way for him to move toward the world. We often say that the more nationalistic it is, the more can it move toward the world. But I do not think this idea adequately true. The correct expression should be like this: with more national characteristics, a work is more likely to move toward the world with the help of translation, for if the translation is not good it will not make it possible for the work to have cosmopolitan significance, but rather, it may well make the originally well-written works become eclipsed. Along with the translation of more of Jia's works, his value and significance will be increasingly recognized.

Among all the contemporary Chinese novelists, Liu Zhenyun (1958-) has steadily developed his writing career and been rising quickly in the past few years of the new century. He was actually known for the representative of the "New Realistic Fiction" in the early 1990s. Although he has later constantly innovated in his narrative techniques and artistic skills, he almost always follows this path steadily, and has eventually become one of the best contemporary novelists of wide international reputation, only next to or even a match to Mo Yan. His novels have been translated into more than 20 languages, which not only cover all the major Western languages, but also have a wide range of influence in the Arabic language and cultural environment. He has won a variety of awards both in the Eastern and Western literary world. His representative novel *Yiju Ding Yiwanzhu* (*One Sentence Equals to Ten Thousand Sentences*) devoted his great effort to writing a masterpiece, with an an-

cient literary style and concise language, full of irony and humor and vivid descriptions. The reason why the novel won the Mao Dun Prize in Literature to a large extent reflects the strong humanistic concern of the author. Liu Zhenyun thought that there are two stages in literary creation. The first is that when writing experience is not rich in the early years of his career, he often likes to describe complicated things with complex sentences and narrative techniques. But when the author's life experience is richer and more mature, he will turn to philosophical reflection on things. On the other hand, when he started writing, he was very easy to rely on his first reaction, that is, intuition. This advantage is that the rhythm of writing is easy and smooth. And once the writing experience and life experience are rich, it is not only the first reaction, but also the natural transition to the second and even the third reaction that enable him to write excellent works. These are not merely out of his own experience but also represent the truth of literary creation. Liu Zhenyun's remarkable creative talent enables him to write with Lu Xun's lyrics on all kinds of characters, including government officials and those intertwined with power. As a novelist, Liu is extremely good at "transforming all the real things into textual truth" thus realizing the aesthetic ideal of the "New Realistic Fiction". Of course, as a contemporary writer, Liu, like his predecessors, has strong realistic mission, and at the same time, he also has a sense of commonality, and he is more concerned about a sense of "return to civilians" or "return to reality". It is also an important reason why his novels are always welcomed and attached importance to by both literary critics and as well as scholars. Recently, Liu Zhenyun's novel, *Wo Bushi Pan Jinlian (I Am Not Pan Jinlian)* has caused extensive repercussions and critical responses which have undoubtedly helped enlarge his influence and reputation. Liu is currently still energetic and increasingly productive, so I am sure that he will produce more excellent works of eternal value and wide international significance.

As one of the earliest avant-garde novelists in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Ge Fei (1964-) was not very productive, but he has accumulated both knowledge and experiences and become increasingly productive since the beginning of the new century. Although he is thought of being influenced by Western postmodernist literature in his early career, yet he is actually more concerned about the historical and social change and vicissitudes of life in the past hundred years. From the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, he began to brew the idea and planned for his ambitious work, and since 2011 he has published his ambitious *Jiangnan Sanbuqu (The Trilogy of the South of the Yangtze River)* composed of three novels, which has turned out an epic series of novels. He sticks to the elite consciousness of literature and art and aesthetic value while describing with a thick brush strokes the historical changes and the intrinsic

spiritual development path of the Chinese society in the past hundred years since the start of the Republic of China in 1911. So it is not surprising that Mo Yan called Ge Fei's Jiangnan trilogy as the second dreaming of mountains and rivers which "inherits the novel *a Dream of the Red Mansions*", because "the hero of the novel Tan Gong is the Jia Baoyu in the present reality". This is obviously the conclusion Mo Yan has drawn from the perspective of the history of Chinese literature. But in my opinion, if we observe it from a broader horizon of world literature, I should say that Ge Fei's trilogy is a spiritual process of modern Chinese intellectuals' "epic" which could be compared with Garcia Marquez's *A Hundred Years' Solitude* to which he is obviously indebted. But the difference between the two lies in that Marquez describes in a "magic realist" method the things that may not have happened in the world, while Mo Yan goes a step further with a "hallucinatory realist" method to represent the inevitable factors contained in the impossible things. Then Ge Fei, through the characters' desire to establish a sort of "Datong world" which is mingled with another character's infatuation of "the land of peach blossom spring", expresses the author's cosmopolitan tendency and universality of aesthetic ideal. This is where Ge Fei's writing is closer to the idealistic spirit formulated by the Nobel committee. After being awarded the Mao Dun Literary Prize, Ge Fei expressed implicitly that "a life without literature is too boring."<sup>6</sup> I think it a very firm belief that all the serious writers and literary scholars have special liking for literature. In this aspect, Ge Fei has set a good example.

### **Chinese Fiction in the Future: Moving among World Literature**

Now, let us come back to the current state of Chinese literature in the new century although I have already discussed briefly some of the novels published in the past seventeen years. Frankly speaking, behind the flourishing appearance, there are quite a few factors which make us worried about the present state and future of Chinese literature. With the strong impact of globalization on the production and circulation of elite Chinese literature and art, people are no longer so interested in serious literature as they used to. That is, they spend more time in reading online and interpersonal communication than reading print books. Nowadays we almost hear the bad news every day that more and more physical book stores have closed along with the rapid development of internet. It is true that internet has provided us with more conveniences to get access to various sorts of information and knowl-

6 Cf. Cheng Xi and Qu Tian, "Ge Fei: a Life without Literature Is Too Boring". [http://news.tsinghua.edu.cn/publish/news/4205/2015/20151012172802401366549/20151012172802401366549\\_.html](http://news.tsinghua.edu.cn/publish/news/4205/2015/20151012172802401366549/20151012172802401366549_.html)

edge as well as literary works. But to a young student, it is still a great challenge for him to select what are worth reading among masses of books and data. We are very much upset that literary works are no longer so attractive to present-day young people, especially to the university students. They are only attractive to and circulated among some eminent writers and critics who still maintain a sort of elite position. More writers, especially those writing and reading online, devote their time and energy to writing for market and a bigger popular audience. Today's writers and literary critics do not want to guide ordinary readers' reading, but rather, try in every means possible to cater favor to them. Some writers even boast their writing speed and royalties they have got. This is obviously an international phenomenon which has made such eminent literary scholar like J. Hillis Miller very much upset. But he still believes that literature should survive contemporary commercialization and high technology and devotes to literary studies (Miller 2015).

As a Chinese literary critic and comparatist, I often worry about such a situation: Can contemporary Chinese writers produce great literary works with such an impetuous creative attitude and mentality? The answer is seemingly negative. But after Mo Yan was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2012, some eminent Chinese novelists have seen the hope. The novelists I have discussed in the above section are certainly most promising candidates as future Nobel laureates. They are still working hard to write their novels not only for domestic readers but also for a wider international audience. But if they want to aim at such a high honor, they must sink in the heart, get rid of all kinds of interference, so as to produce great literary masterpieces of eternal significance and value. On the other hand, as literary critics and comparatists, we should discover those really excellent works and their authors so as to introduce them to international literary scholarship and critical circles, at least to the English readers and literary scholars. But unfortunately, such translation and introduction are so little that even those well known modern and contemporary literary works and their authors in China are little known to the English speaking world. Along with the swift development in Chinese economy, to build a great cultural China has also become a task for us literary and humanities scholars. Since there is no such authoritative literary prize in China which could be compared with the Nobel Prize, we have to attach greater importance to the latter. There have appeared some promising things: members of the Swedish Academy have more and more closely observed some prominent Chinese novelists and their excellent works; quite a few prestigious Western presses have organized translations of great Chinese novels; some far-sighted English journals, like the editors of *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, *Neohelicon*, etc., have invited

distinguished scholars to edit special issues discussing contemporary Chinese literature with regard to world literature.<sup>7</sup> We are sure that the second Nobel laureate will appear in China in the years to come.

It is no doubt that there are other important Chinese novelists whose works have already been and will be translated into English and other major international languages, such as Tie Ning (1957-), Li Rui (1950-), Su Tong (1963-), Wang Anyi (1954-), Xu Xiaobin (1953-) and Bi Feiyu (1964-). It is good that they are exclusively novelists, which shows that novel is the most important and popular genre in contemporary China although the country used to be a “kingdom of poetry”. Some of these novelists have been studied by international scholars and Ph.D students. These great efforts will certainly contribute a great deal to the internationalization of contemporary Chinese fiction. About one hundred and ninety years ago, Goethe, after reading some Chinese novels of minor importance, conceptualized the term *Weltliteratur*. Now to write a history of world novel should not neglect the existence and influence of Chinese fiction.

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7 It is true that in recent years, more and more attention has been given to Chinese literature and culture. Apart from translations of Chinese novels organized by some Anglo-American publishers, I myself have been invited to edit quite a few special issues on Chinese literature and culture for such Euro-American journals like *Neohelicon*, *Narrative*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, *Modern Language Quarterly*, *Telos*, *ISLE*, etc.

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