



Contemporary China and its literature in transition

Jiangkai Liu¹

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Abstract The global power dynamics with the new and old forces is undergoing subtle but profound changes. Contemporary China has managed to make its comeback to the center stage of the world with phenomenal advances in many fields, but its cultural influence has seriously lagged behind. The growing Chinese ‘cultural consciousness’ will challenge the stereotypical perceptions of China from other countries. Therefore, the significance of discussions on the ‘contemporary’ nature of contemporary Chinese literature and its place in the canon of world literature lies in the close connection between literature and the reality and the need of contemporary Chinese literature to reflect the current relationship between ‘China’ and the ‘world’. China’s reentry into the new order of the world will definitely bring about the corresponding representations of this historical period in the respects of literary imagination and creation.

Keywords Contemporary Chinese culture · Cultural consciousness · Contemporariness · Internationalization · World literature

This is a time with the subtle but profound changes in the world dynamics, and the high-speed growth of China is surely to break down the widespread stereotypes against China. In the complex global situation with the intense divergence in perceptions, how to read China and how to represent China will certainly become a focus for political and cultural forces from China as well as other parts of the world.

Translated by Xuemei Shi, Shenyang University, China.

✉ Jiangkai Liu
ljk@bnu.edu.cn

¹ The Academy of International Communication of Chinese Culture, Beijing Normal University, Beijing 100875, China

China has arguably returned to the center stage of the world in many aspects, but embarrassingly, the influence of its contemporary culture has seriously lagged behind. For China which is a major economy in the world today and was a brilliant and influential civilization in history, this situation is as awkward as a leading role upon the stage without much to say.

The term ‘cultural consciousness’ is a counterpart concept proposed by Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong in the mid-late 1990s after reading Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* (《文明冲突论》),¹ and it mainly refers to peoples’ self-awareness and self-knowledge about the culture they live in pertaining to its origin and root, formation and evolution, features and trends.²

The power of ‘cultural consciousness’ in its vigorous development has arguably reshaped Chinese people’s acknowledgement of the world’s power structure, and has posed new challenges to both China and the world: Chinese people need to ‘tell China’ better to the world, while people from other countries need to constantly ‘reread China’. In this way, their dialogues and interchanges can jointly contribute to a more comprehensive and objective global vision about China. We believe that contemporary China, no matter in reality or in literary imagination, seems to be standing on a turning point of world history calling for a new era of literature.

Every historical period is supposed to have its own literature so naturally the literature of a given historical period must be closely and deeply tied to the social reality of that time. If this is true, then what is the reality and future direction of contemporary Chinese literature? Among a number of possible angles to approach the question, my focus centers around the key words of ‘contemporariness’ and ‘internationalization’, and I sincerely welcome suggestions, advices, and discussions from my peers and the experts in the field.

I. The ‘contemporariness’ of the contemporary literature

The biggest question in the relationship between contemporary literature and reality in recent years, to my personal observations, is how literature represents and deals with the reality of the contemporary world. Put it more specifically, how can we create great literary works that can provide the typical experiences of Chinese current developments, can portray the mindset of contemporary Chinese people, can emotionally speak to the general public, can both manifest distinctive Chinese characteristics and embody universal human experiences, and can integrate realism, artistic taste, and criticism at the same time?

In the commentary written in 2013 on Yu Hua’s novel *The Seventh Day* (《第七天》),³ I shared my viewpoint that discussions about contemporary literature should also attend to their ‘contemporariness’ rather than exclusively on their ‘literary’ value. I summarized the nature and features of Yu Hua’s ‘contemporary writing’ style as follows: the content focuses on the present in lieu of history; the narration style maximally closes the gap between literature and reality so that the story

¹ Huntington (1998).

² Fei (1997).

³ Liu (2013).

directly speaks to the readers' personal life experience; overall, great efforts are made to infinitely reflect real life experiences to give readers a sense of familiarity.

In fact, the mature and ideal 'contemporary writing' can hardly exist in that such writing will come with a paradoxical risk in aesthetics. Its focus on realism and criticism and the extensive realistic portrayals and real experiences will compromise the poetic aesthetic value, reduce the sacredness of literature, and downgrade the artistic value, which enormously challenges the writers' skill as well as the readers' habit and aesthetic experience. Thus, the biggest problem for 'contemporary writing' is how to balance its focus on contemporary reality and its artistic value well.

On the whole, contemporary Chinese literature is plagued by being over 'literary' but under 'contemporary' in style, as well as the excessive 'historical' narratives but the underrepresented 'contemporary' reality in content, which manifests a common dilemma faced by contemporary writers when they are dealing with literature and reality or the literary value and realistic involvement in their works.

When we compare the representative works of those internationally recognized contemporary Chinese writers with the so-called 'grassroot literature' or realism novels, we will find that the former often distance themselves from the current reality in terms of characters, plots, or the time or place background, while the latter reflect the social reality such as anti-corruption issues or urban romances but can hardly reach ideal artistic standard.

Being 'contemporary' is the defining feature of contemporary literature so it must be highlighted in contemporary Chinese literature. Underrepresentation or undervaluation of the feature, no matter in literary creation or in literary criticism, may breed a certain degree of discordance between literature and its time. In this sense, I think Yu Hua's new novel *The seventh day* continued and reinforced the style of 'contemporary writing' from his earlier book *Brother* (《兄弟》), and the efforts and problems behind these novels are worthy of serious studies and reflections.

Many renowned contemporary writers have recently paid more attention to 'contemporary' nature in their literary creation. In Mo Yan's new works, for instance, particularly in the new novels created after his Nobel Prize award, one notable difference is the focus on 'contemporary' elements, as evidenced in his following new works in order of publication time: the play script *Brocade Clothing* (《锦衣》), the poetry collection *Seven Stars Shine on Me* (《七星耀我》) in volume 9 of *People's Literature* magazine (2017), the novel *A Peaceful World* (《天下太平》) in volume 11 of *People's Literature* magazine (2017), *People and Stories of Hometown* (《故乡人事》) a collection of three short novels in volume 5 of *Harvest* magazine (2017), *Cousin Ning Saiye*⁴ (《表弟宁赛叶》), *The Poet Jin Xipu*⁵ (《诗人金希普》) in volume 1 of *Flower City* magazine (2018), *Waiting for Moxi* (《等待摩西》), the poem *Aliens on the Highway* (《高速公路上的外星人》), *Flying* (《飞翔》), *Who Wants to Die* (《谁舍得死》) in volume 1 of *October* magazine (2018), the opera

⁴ The name Ning Saiye is actually the reversed reading of the name Ye Saining which is the Chinese translation of the Russian poet Сергей Александрович Есенин.

⁵ The name Jin Xipu is the reversed reading of the name Pu Xijin which is the Chinese translation of the Russian poet Александр Сергеевич Пушкин.

Sorghum Wine (《高粱酒》 in volume 5 of *People's Literature* magazine 2018), and the opera *Sandalwood Death* (《檀香刑》 co-authored by Li Yuntao, in volume 4 of *October* 2018). Although most of the new works still used the same narrative techniques such as the interspersion of 'past' and 'present', frame story and inter-linked storylines, they were rich in 'contemporary' representations and modernity as illustrated in the following examples: the description of environment pollution and video recording to disseminate the positive energy in *The Peaceful World*, the portrayal of Jin Xipu's bragging and polishing himself in *The Poet Jin Xipu*, the drunk's dialogues briefing Chinese developments from 1980s to the new century in *Cousin Ning Saiye*, and the similar method of 'the social development reflected in the individual life' used in *Waiting for Moxi* and *Eyes of the Landlord* (《地主的眼神》). These works clearly manifest the withdrawal of the old and the rise of the new in terms of people and features in the contemporary time. Certainly, Mo Yan's new works have other new changes worthy of notice and they will be discussed elsewhere. A greater emphasis on 'contemporary' nature can also be found, directly or indirectly, in the new works of other writers including Jia Pingwa, Ge Fei, and Su Tong, albeit differences in their expressions. In addition to the contemporary focus and realism, I hold that it is equally necessary for contemporary literature to re-call the 'pioneer spirit' of literature. In fact, I believe it is a challenge to all the contemporary writers including Mo Yan to explore how to express contemporary reality artistically with the pioneer spirit. This challenge is beyond the scope of this article, and it has yet to be discussed in detail elsewhere.

II. Internationalization of contemporary literature and China's stand

With the establishment of contemporary literature and its criticism, another important issue and trend remains and needs some patient dialectical thinking: internationalization of contemporary literature and China's take. Please allow me to leave out the lengthy argumentation section in my Chinese paper on the issue and directly share some essential discussions here.

Firstly, the ever greater historicization and internationalization are definitely happening in contemporary Chinese literature. They are two paths that contemporary Chinese literature must go through in order to find its place in the canon of world literature, and they also reflect the new changes after China's reentry into the world's new order in the respects of literary imagination and creation. 'Finding a place in the canon of world literature' means the scope of our anticipations of and ambitions in the future of the contemporary literature has been extended beyond China to the world, and this means many famous classical authors in China such as Mo Yan, Jia Pingwa, and Yu Hua have to undergo an even more complex process to become established in the canon of world literature. From this perspective, Chinese contemporary writers including Nobel Prize winner Mo Yan may just begin their journey and there is still a long way to go.

Secondly, internationalization of contemporary literature cannot just refer to the spread of translated literary works, but should also involve literary criticism and studies. Chinese scholars should take initiatives to step out of the circle of Chinese literature in order to be actively engaged in literary criticism and studies of contemporary literature on the global stage, just as what their overseas counterparts have

been doing in criticism of contemporary Chinese literature. This would solve the problem that contemporary Chinese literature is 'being represented', and this will also promote the popularity of contemporary Chinese literature in the world. The international communication and studies of contemporary Chinese literature were 'budding but not booming' historically and are now 'many but messy', a phenomenon which is directly related to the 'discordance' among the studies done in the field. The little-explored research area, the lack of previous research experience, and the burst of research passion have generated a series of problems in the field such as regurgitation and unidirectionality in the research.

Thirdly, it is vital to strengthen the 'soft power' of contemporary Chinese culture in its development no matter this is out of Chinese intellectuals' cultural consciousness or the Chinese government's advocacy of building cultural confidence. For instance, the fundamental trend of the international communication of contemporary Chinese literature ought to be based on the strict adherence to China's stand which stresses that each culture is distinctive and the aim of cultural interchange is to seek harmony but not the sameness. That is to say, the issue of 'the international communication of contemporary literature' should be incorporated into the research body of contemporary literature as a significant component, and it should integrate the research methods and achievements from disciplines in other countries such as sinology, translation study, comparative literature so that the multidisciplinary interchange and integration can be realized in the pursuit of 'harmony but not sameness'. This principle can also be applied to other studies involving the international communication such as Chinese philosophy, history, fine arts, music and so on. Using the same research topic to unite and absorb any discrepancy (in, say, ethnicity, nationality, language and culture) will greatly stretch the scope of traditional disciplines, sparkle research passion to explore those formerly unimaginable areas, and build a more dynamic research field with more challenges as well as a greater prospect.

The research experiences and fruits of recent years in the field of the international communication of contemporary literature suggest that there are two most effective routes to the greater influence and popularity of contemporary Chinese literature and culture. One route is the quality which is the prerequisite and the material foundation in international communication of Chinese culture. Whether it is for literary works, authors, or research studies, the lack of good quality can only earn some polite diplomatic responses from the world for them. So, we have to, in words of phenomenology, 'go back to the things themselves' or 'seek truth from the facts'. People like 'the Poet Jin Xipu' may steal honor, treasure, love or even power, but they can never attain sincere recognition from the educated and civilized people who choose not to break their lies or humiliate them. Culture, after all, is all about individuals' free and voluntary choice so those ungrounded self-contented and self-important ideas which exist in the domestic environment can hardly work when it comes to the international communication and global readers.

The necessary and much-needed supplementary route is the extensive support from the national power in a more respect way to culture itself. Currently, Chinese government is willing to and is able to further its support in the international exchanges of Chinese culture, but the implementation and operation process is not

always perfect. How to better enable the professionals to develop their cultural influence is an issue of system management and needs specific analyses. According to my research experiences in the past decade, there are some reflections and solutions worthy of consideration both from the government level to the specific field. Of course, this is another question beyond the scope of this article here.

To conclude, literature and its research should map the reality of China itself and the current relationship between China and the world. So, the issue of being ‘contemporary’ or internationalizing contemporary literature is, in essence, a reflection of the connection between contemporary ‘China’ and the ‘world’, as well as the representation of China after its re-entry into the new order of the world in respects of literary imagination and creation. In terms of contemporary Chinese literature, on one hand, it sees the recurring ‘historicization’ in various forms, and on the other hand, it freshly starts the journey of finding its place in the canon of world literature. Literature is supposed to spread voices of every era, reflect and criticize the reality, observe and crystalize humanity, so it is the responsibility of contemporary literature to help the current generation better understand themselves, the society and the world. The ever-regenerate power of contemporary literature will surely engender the new-born forces, and every new generation certainly has its own mission. It is always true that a new era calls for the rise of new forces, and the new power fuels new developments. In this way, history repeats itself and this is how it ever flows forward.

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