

## COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND CONTEMPORARY CHINESE LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF BELT AND ROAD

By NING WANG\*

Chinese literature once had its splendid era in the Tang and Song Dynasties culminating in Tang poetry and influencing the literatures of its neighboring countries. However, during the past centuries, it has largely been “marginalized” on the map of world literature. On the one hand, large numbers of foreign literary works, especially those from Western countries, have been translated into Chinese, exerting a huge influence on the formation of a sort of modern Chinese literary tradition. On the other hand, few contemporary Chinese literary works have been translated into the major foreign languages. With the help of the rise and flourishing of comparative literature, contemporary Chinese literature has been moving toward the world and had its own Nobel laureate. The author, after analyzing the reasons why Chinese literature has been “marginalized,” argues that Chinese literature will develop steadily in the age of globalization. Globalization in China has undergone three steps: first, it has made China passively involved in this irresistible trend; second, the country has then quickly adapted itself to this trend; and third, China has started to play an increasingly leading role in the first decade of the present century. In this way, contemporary Chinese literature and comparative literature studies will steadily develop with the help of the “Belt and Road” initiative.

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\* NING WANG is a distinguished professor of English and Comparative Literature at Tsinghua University and Zhiyuan Chair of Humanities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China.

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## INTRODUCTION

We usually hold that comparative literature was introduced to China from the West as a “traveling discipline.” In the process of its traveling it has been combined with Chinese literature studies, especially the study of modern Chinese literature. Modern Chinese literature formed its unique tradition under Western influence. However, in recent years, along with the “Belt and Road” initiative proposed by Chinese leader Xi Jinping, comparative literature studies, with regard to modern Chinese literature, has undergone a sort of shift from a focus on how modern Chinese literature has developed under Western influence to how contemporary Chinese literature has been moving toward the world in an attempt to be part of world literature. This is undoubtedly stimulated by the initiative of the “Belt and Road,” and this shift has much to do with translation and the advent of globalization. As such, the present essay starts with a global perspective from which I will deal with both comparative literature and contemporary Chinese literature in the context of Belt and Road.

### COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN CHINA TODAY: A “GLOCAL” PERSPECTIVE

The issue of globalization has been discussed in the Chinese context for over 20 years. It is true that globalization is no longer regarded as merely an economic phenomenon, for it has had a tremendous influence on Chinese literature and culture studies, especially on comparative literature studies, as this discipline is best known for its cross-cultural and international characteristics. Doing comparative literature studies involves translation, especially in the Chinese context, since comparative literature as a globalized discipline is characterized by dealing with two or more literatures crossing the border of languages and cultural traditions. Thus, we cannot do comparative studies of different literatures without the help of translation. As scholars largely agree that there are different types of translation, translation studies can be observed on different levels. From the perspective of comparative literature, we usually pay more attention to the critical and creative reception of one literature in another language or cultural environment and the consequence of such influence, reception and even

metamorphosis. As an example, I will explore further the reception of Western literature in China by illustrating how a large-scale translation in the twentieth century has helped form a modern Chinese literary tradition which is not only different from its Western counterpart but also from its ancient tradition. Thus, conducting comparative studies of literature, crossing the border of languages and cultural environments, is also a “glocalized” practice in the Chinese context. As comparative literature in the age of globalization is increasingly characterized by world literature, I will deal with this issue as it has a close relationship with Chinese literature. In addition, as a “glocalized” or “sinicized” practice, world literature also has its Chinese version, or a sort of “glocalized” version of Chinese characteristics.

As I have indicated above, doing comparative studies of different national literatures is to some extent synonymous with translation studies from a comparative and intercultural perspective. In the past thirty years, comparative literature has largely been impacted by the rise of cultural studies. Due to this sort of impact, comparative studies of literature have more or less been merged with cultural studies and translation studies. Therefore, they should be viewed as one important area under the broad umbrella of cultural studies. Some comparatists who are also involved in translation practice and studies, especially Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere,<sup>1</sup> have even called for a “cultural turn” in translation studies and a “translation turn” in cultural studies, for to them, in the age of globalization, translation should continue to occupy an important place in human knowledge and play a vital role in “locating” and “relocating” global cultures.<sup>2</sup>

In the age of globalization, tremendous changes have taken place in comparative literature studies, with world literature becoming an increasingly attractive cutting-edge theoretical topic among both comparatists and translation scholars. However, globalization usually travels in two directions: its effect travels from the West to the East and from the East to the West. In this global era, since “all identities are irreducibly hybrid, inevitably instituted by the representation of performance as statement,”<sup>3</sup> conducting East-West comparative studies of literature is even more challenging as there is a huge difference between these two big cultural traditions and literary en-

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<sup>1</sup> In this respect, especially cf. Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ning Wang, “Translation and the Relocation of Global Cultures: Mainly a Chinese Perspective,” *Asia Pacific Translation and Intercultural Studies* 2, 1(2015): 4-14.

<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, 155.

vironments. In this respect, translation may well have much to contribute to reconstructing national cultural and literary identity and re-mapping world literature. It has gone far beyond the superficial level of linguistic rendition, reaching the level of cultural interaction and relocation. Therefore, it is quite natural, especially for comparatists, that research on translation should attach more importance to its cultural aspects. In calling for the independence of translation studies from comparative literature, Susan Bassnett once affirmed:

Comparative literature as a discipline has had its day. Cross-cultural work in women's studies, in post-colonial theory, in cultural studies has changed the face of literary studies generally. We should look upon Translation Studies as the principal discipline from now on, with comparative literature as a valued but subsidiary subject area.<sup>4</sup>

Although her view is somewhat radical, she has at least warned us comparatists of the internal crisis within our field. It is true to some extent that during the past decades or more, remarkable achievements have been made in contemporary translation studies after its "cultural turn." Thus, I would argue that translation has in the past decades played an important role in the reconstruction of world literature in different cultural environments, which in turn has more or less helped comparative literature studies step out of its crisis.

No doubt comparative literature studies in the age of globalization have culminated in world literature. We know that in canonizing world literature, the most powerful institutional authority in the twentieth century to manipulate the fame of a writer is the Swedish Academy which awards the Nobel Prize in Literature. This prize may well make an unknown writer world-renowned and canonize his/her work within a short period of time. It is especially true in China, where millions of people bought books by Mo Yan immediately after he won the prize in October 2012. Even so, according to Horace Engdahl, former permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy:

[canonicity] is a function of forces that cannot be controlled and do not form a closed and identifiable system. Cultural authority is only one of these forces and perhaps not the strongest. The symbolic power that the Nobel Prize has accumulated over a hundred years is demonstrably insufficient to make an author canonical, but

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, 161.

sufficient to arouse the curiosity of posterity.<sup>5</sup>

This point has proved particularly true today: winning the prize enables an author to be recognized worldwide and his/her work to become part of world literature. In the Chinese context, Mo Yan's prize winning has indeed helped the ever-shrinking contemporary Chinese literature step out its crisis and made more young people interested in literature. In this respect, translation plays a very valuable role. Gao Xingjian's prize-winning work *Soul Mountain* had an excellent English translator in Mabel Lee, while many of his diaspora Chinese peers have not yet met such excellent translators. Similarly, Mo Yan's prize winning is even truer in this. Without the superb English translation produced by Howard Goldblatt, who in a dynamic way represented Mo Yan's works in idiomatic English, Mo Yan's prize winning would have been delayed, or he would most probably have missed this great honor.<sup>6</sup> In this way, we can affirm that to move effectively toward the world, one should first of all move toward the English speaking world.

Discussing the issue of world literature in China today is even more significant. In the old society, when China was poor and Chinese culture and literature had no place in world literature, its writers simply called for translating foreign literary works into Chinese so that modern Chinese literature could move from periphery to center and finally toward the world. Today, with the rapid development of Chinese economic and political strength, the initiative of "One Belt and One Road" has been effectively practiced in the past few years. Thus, it is more urgent for current literary scholars to relocate Chinese literature on the map of world literature.

Frankly speaking, to move toward the world and make Chinese literature part of world literature has long been an aspiration of Chinese writers and literary scholars from the beginning of the New Culture Movement (1915-1923), which indeed played an important role in pushing China toward the world. However, if we re-examine the positive and negative consequences of this movement from today's point of view, we may surprisingly find that in bringing various Western literary and cultural trends and academic theories to China, those Chinese writers and intellectuals involved in the

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<sup>5</sup> Horace Engdahl, "Canonization and World Literature: The Nobel Experience," in *World Literature. World Culture*, Karen-Margrethe Simonsen and Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (eds), Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008, 210.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ning Wang, "Cosmopolitanism and the Internationalization of Chinese Literature," in *Mo Yan in Context: Nobel Laureate and Global Storyteller*, Angelica Duran and Yuhan Huang (eds), West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2014, 167-81.

New Culture Movement did overlook the potential for introducing Chinese culture and literature to the outside world. Similarly, in destroying the Confucian temples, they also eliminated the positive elements of Confucianism, thereby precipitating the “crisis of belief” in contemporary China. Now it is high time to revive some of the Confucian humanistic ideas in a selective and dynamic way and endow them with fresh content and the new spirit of the present time.

### **CHINESE LITERARY SITUATION IN THE CONTEXT OF “BELT AND ROAD”**

In contemporary China, the concept of “Belt and Road” or “One Belt and One Road” has become a heatedly discussed topic as it has helped and will continue to help China’s economic development and cultural production move toward the world. It has not only stimulated Chinese writers’ creative desire, but also attracted the attention of major international media and mainstream academia. The “Belt and Road” initiative, namely, “the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road,” is usually regarded as a political and economic strategy adopted by the Chinese Party and government for its current and future economic development. If we think that globalization is a sort of process largely from the West to the East, then the “Belt and Road” initiative should be regarded as another type of globalization: from East to West, or more exactly, from China to the world. Since the Chinese economy has become the second largest world economic entity and will hopefully surpass the United States in the years to come, it has undoubtedly contributed a great deal to the world economy. However, culturally and literarily speaking, it is far from satisfactory. There is actually a big imbalance between the impacts of the Chinese economy and Chinese culture. The “Belt and Road” initiative will also be proved significant and valid along with its practice at present and in the near future, for it not only appeals to economic development, but also to cultural development. In literary terms, it has already stimulated Chinese writers and humanities scholars not only to write for domestic readers, but also to write for an international audience so that Chinese literature and humanities will be known far and wide in the world. It will certainly help Chinese literature to be part of world literature and China’s humanities scholarship to be more influential in international academic circles. However, the present reality is not so exciting.

The current discussion and debate on the issue of world literature largely started from Goethe’s conjecture of *Weltliteratur*, which was first conceptualized although not

necessarily first used by this German thinker and writer under the inspiration of oriental literature, including Chinese, Indian and Persian literature. It is undoubtedly true that Chinese literature once had its splendid era culminating in Tang poetry and influencing the literatures of its neighboring countries. Unfortunately, during the past two or three centuries, largely due to its backward economy and inefficient government as well as political turmoil, Chinese literature has largely been marginalized on the map of world literature. With the help of the rise and flourishing of comparative literature in China, modern Chinese literature has established its own canon and had its own Nobel laureate in Mo Yan. In this way, in the age of globalization, Chinese literature has been experiencing a sort of “demarginalization” and “recentralization,” moving toward the world in an attempt to be part of world literature. In the process of globalization, China has certainly benefited a great deal in an overall way. Judging by its “glocalized” practice in the country, I think that globalization has actually undergone three stages: first, it made China passively involved in this irresistible trend; second, China has in the shortest possible time adapted itself to the trend of globalization; and third, China has been playing an increasingly leading role in the process of globalization.<sup>7</sup> With the United States seemingly a less directing hand in terms of globalization since the beginning of the Trump presidency, China has been shouldering an increasingly heavy task, not only economically and politically, but also culturally. That is, China ought to make greater contributions to both the global economy and international relations as well as to the formation of the new framework of global culture. Hence, it is contemporary Chinese literature in the context of the “Belt and Road” which will develop and be among the forest of world literature in such a context.

Ancient China developed so fast that in the Tang dynasty (618-907), it became one of the most powerful and prosperous countries in the world, not only politically and economically but also culturally. It is not surprising that Chinese people at the time viewed their country as the “Middle Kingdom,” and China was also called a kingdom of poetry, as Tang poetry flourished, while in Europe, it was still the “dark” Middle Ages. However, due to 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 with Europe and America developing rapidly and soon occupying the center of the world. The past “Middle Kingdom” had unavoidably become a second-class weak country with a vast territory but hundreds of millions of poor people.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ning Wang, “Globalisation as Glocalisation in China: A New Perspective,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 11 (2015), 2059–2074.

In order to change this situation and bring China closer to the world, Chinese intellectuals once launched large-scale translations of Western cultural and literary works into Chinese, viewing it as the only way of identifying China with the world. Due to this overall Westernization, literary translation in China is indeed rather imbalanced. Numerous Western literary works are available in Chinese, while very few excellent Chinese works have been translated into other languages, partly due to the absence of excellent translation and partly due to the bias of Orientalism prevailing in Western literary scholarship as well as the mass media. In the age of globalization, Chinese literature, like literature elsewhere, is severely challenged by the rise of global popular culture and consumer culture. Serious literature and elite literary studies could not but be on the decline, especially when the Internet dominates and today's young people would rather read online than go to the library. In order for Chinese literature to be part of world literature in the shortest possible time, some Chinese scholars and translators, including myself, once thought it merely a matter of translation. That is, we have seldom translated our own literature into the major world languages, especially English. Sometimes, even though we have produced translations of Chinese literary works, the quality of the translated versions and their readability are far from satisfactory. This is perhaps part of the reason for the current relatively marginal position of Chinese literature in the world.

There is another important reason for this. That is marketing in the age of globalization. Along with the rapid development of high technology and the Internet, the print book market is increasingly shrinking. From an international and comparative point of view, the current situation of the book market is much worse, with numerous physical bookstores closing daily not only in China but also elsewhere. If we go to any British or American book store, we can hardly find many books written by Chinese writers even in English translation, let alone those written directly in the Chinese language. In sharp contrast, if you go to any book store in China, you may easily find numerous foreign literary works translated into Chinese. However, books of similar titles authored by Chinese scholars hardly circulate so well, sometimes even domestically.

People might well think that efficient translation is needed. It is true to some extent, but it cannot account for this. 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 Western influence, it can hardly be compared to its Western counterpart even when



translated into English or other major foreign languages, for many modern Chinese writers just imitated their Western masters in their writing. As for translating Chinese literature into foreign languages, we should wait for foreign language native speakers to do the job. However, what if they do not want to do it? We can do nothing but wait for a sort of “Godot” who will most probably never come. Thus, the current unbalanced situation of translation appears in China’s literary and critical circles. If we do not solve the problem, we cannot expect the real age of world literature to come.

## **PRESENT-DAY CHINESE FICTION AND WORLD LITERATURE**

Although China was once a “kingdom of poetry,” in the contemporary Chinese literary field, fiction has no doubt always been the most popular since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it has the biggest market compared with the other genres of literary production. 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 1976, because modern Chinese literature, especially fiction writing, formed largely under Western influence. We usually say that there was an “overall Westernization” in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century until the 1920s. Then, after 1976, especially after 1978 when Deng Xiaoping became the leader of China’s Party and state and started the economic reform and opening up to the outside world, there appeared a second high tide of “overall Westernization,” in which Chinese literature has been more and more open to the world in an attempt to move toward the world and become part of world literature. Mo Yan’s Nobel prize marks the real beginning of contemporary Chinese literature’s moving toward the world and becoming part of world literature. However, Mo Yan is only one of the many eminent Chinese novelists whose literary achievements can be viewed as important. Since I have discussed Mo Yan elsewhere,<sup>8</sup> I will, in this section, just briefly discuss several other well-known Chinese novelists who have a wide international reputation and who are most promising to become future Nobel laureates.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Wang Ning, “A Reflection on Postmodernist Fiction in China: Avant-Garde Narrative Experimentation,” *Narrative*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2013): 326-338; Ning Wang, “Cosmopolitanism and the Internationalization of Chinese Literature,” in Angelica Duran and Yuhan Huang eds., *Mo Yan in Context: Nobel Laureate and Global Storyteller*, pp. 167-181.

Yan Lianke (1958-), Franz Kafka Prize winner and a finalist for the Man Booker International Prize, is one of the best known contemporary Chinese novelists after Mo Yan, and is also regarded as a most promising candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature largely due to his wide international reputation and influence among both domestic and overseas scholars and critics. His works have so far been translated into more than twenty languages. Among his best-known works are *Riguang Liunian* (*Time Flying*), *Shou Huo* (*Living with Sufferings*), *Dingzhuang Meng* (*Dream of Dingzhuang Village*), *Fengya Song* (*Song of Elegance*), and *Si Shu* (*Four Books*).

Although Yan has won lots of domestic literary prizes, since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, he has been increasingly well known internationally. Also like Mo Yan, Yan has not been influenced much by modern Chinese literature but more profoundly influenced by modern and postmodern Western literature. However, unlike Mo Yan, Yan has a stronger consciousness of theory with a burning interest in and profound attainment to 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*. Thus, he deals with fundamental issues concerning all the people in the world. In this way, he has produced excellent works of allegorical significance and eternal value. Although he is regarded by critical circles as a “master of the absurd realism,” he does not care for this designation. To my mind, it is correct that 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 humor colors. Readers can laugh at their absurd behaviors but express implicit sympathy toward them, for they are nothing but victims of society. Since he admires Kafka so much so that he 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 Lianke’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 how Samuel Beckett responded to his French readers on a similar occasion. However, Yan echoed his French master in the Chinese context, which indicates how closely his works are related to Western and world literature.

Yu Hua (1960-) is probably the most influential and best known contemporary Chinese novelist, next only to Mo Yan, or as well known as Mo Yan from an international point of view, with almost all his important works translated into English, French, German, Russian, Italian, Dutch, Norwegian, Korean and Japanese. His writ-

ing has also long attracted 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 for its special issue on postmodernism and China. I, in discussing the metamorphosed version of Chinese postmodernity, spent some space discussing Yu Hua although he was at the time a rising Chinese avant-garde novelist of postmodern tendencies.<sup>9</sup> Another eminent American journal of comparative literature *Modern Language Quarterly* also published an article discussing a particular novel of Yu Hua,<sup>10</sup> which is very rare in the English-speaking world. 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 of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction. Zhang Yimou's adaptation of his novel *Huozhe* (*To Live*, 1993) has largely expanded Yu Hua's international reputation and influence. It has promoted his novel of the same title in both the domestic and international book markets.

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 declared 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. However, he thinks that if a writer wants to write an excellent work of eternal value he should suffer from "loneliness," devoting himself to writing like Kafka and Joyce.<sup>11</sup>

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 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. Today's literary critical circles think that Yu Hua's works in the 1990s are different from those produced in the 1980s,

<sup>9</sup> Wang Ning, "The Mapping of Chinese Postmodernity", *Boundary 2*, 24, 3 (1997): 19-40.

<sup>10</sup> Liu Kang, "The Short-Lived Avant-Garde: The Transformation of Yu Hua," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 63, 1 (2002): 89-117.

<sup>11</sup> Wang Ning, "Jieshou yu bianxing: Zhongguo dangdai xianfeng xiaoshuo de houxiandaixing" (Reception and Metamorphosis: The Postmodernity in Contemporary Chinese Avant-garde Fiction). *Zhongguo shehui kexue* (*Social Sciences in China*), No. 1 (1992): 137-149.

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 perspective, shows a kind of indifferent attitude and persistence of power, providing another method of historical narrative.

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 striking national characteristics, and even his narrative language has a striking northwestern characteristic and strong accent, with some dialects which are thought untranslatable appearing now and then in his works. Even so, it has not prevented his works from being circulated on the international book market. His works have so far been translated into some ten languages and had considerable influence among overseas literary scholars. He is best known for his novels *Fuzao* (*Impetuous*, 1987), *Feidu* (*Deserted City*, 1993) and *Qinqiang* (*Qinqiang Opera*, 2005). Jia is also one of the very few Chinese novelists who can be recorded in the history of Chinese as well as world literature due to his outstanding literary achievements. He started his literary career as early as the 1980s, but it was the publication of *Deserted City* that brought 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. His works, characterized by microscopic narrative and meticulously 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. *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 the so-called Qingfeng Street over some twenty years, describes a sort of mortal illness and death, joys and sorrows of fate, and vividly recreates the shock and changes in the history of China's social transformation. His narrative perspective is unique. With delicate plain language, the novelist writes in a "dense fleeting way" about the profound changes in the traditional pattern of rural values and interpersonal relationships in an era of reform and opening up to the outside world. Between the lines, he devotes a deep feeling for and thinking about the status of rural areas brought about by the social transformation of his hometown. Coming from the Northwest Plateau, Jia makes his works full of local flavor, and even the language is also filled with national characteristics. It is just these nationalist characteristics that have paved the way for him to move toward the world. Along with the translation of more of Jia's works, especially the English translations by Howard Goldblatt, his value and international

significance will be more and more recognized.

As one of the earliest avant-garde novelists in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Ge Fei (1964-), penname Liu Yong, a professor of Chinese and comparative literature at Tsinghua University, was not very productive, but he has really accumulated both knowledge and experiences and become increasingly productive since the beginning of the new century. 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 into an epic series of novels. He sticks to the elite consciousness of literature and art and aesthetic value while describing with thick brush strokes the historical changes and the intrinsic spiritual development of Chinese society in the past hundred years since the start of the Republic of China in 1911, effectively responding to the noise of “death of the novel” from the literary world. In my opinion, if we observe it from the broader horizon of world literature, Ge Fei’s trilogy is a spiritual process of the modern Chinese intellectual “epic” which could be compared with Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, to which he is obviously indebted. Apart from his ambition to write about history, Ge Fei also has the ideal of a future vision. Through the characters’ desire to establish a sort of “Datong world,” which is mingled with another character’s infatuation with “the land of peach blossom spring,” he expresses his 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>12</sup> This reminds me of my interview with Kjell Espmark, Chair of the Nobel Committee for over ten years, many years ago in which he also thought that “literature will not die in the years to come,” for to him, literature is a unique spiritual and cultural product. The function of the language in which literature is produced can never be replaced by any other means of representation. People cannot enjoy the pleasure of literature by means of seeing films or watching TV. They need to read literature, in the process of which they can get great aesthetic pleasure and enjoyment. In this sense, “literature will not die out as long as the human society exists.”<sup>13</sup> I think it is a very firm belief of all writers and literary

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<sup>12</sup> 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)

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Wang Ning, “Nuobeier wenxuejiang, zhongguo wenxue he wenxue de weilai: fang nuobeier wenxuejiang weiyuanhui zhuxi aisipumake jiaoshou” (Nobel Prize for Literature, Chinese Literature

scholars who have a special liking for literature.

## TOWARD A COSMOPOLITAN VISION OF CHINA'S LITERARY STUDIES

The above description of contemporary Chinese fiction will undoubtedly indicate how important and how valuable contemporary Chinese fiction can be for the world. The reason why Goethe could make his conjecture of “Weltliteratur” is largely due to his broad cosmopolitan vision of non-European literature and wide reading of non-Western literary works, especially Chinese, Indian and Persian literature. When we talk about cosmopolitanism in the age of globalization, we are actually talking about a sort of attitude and horizon. To my understanding, first of all, cosmopolitanism in culture does not necessarily mean cultural homogenization.<sup>14</sup> From a cultural point of view, even if we discuss the same topic like world literature and cosmopolitanism, it is still of more diversity than similarity. Since literature is the art of language dealing with what human beings are fundamentally concerned about, it should describe the human state and destiny. In a cosmopolitan city like New York, London, Paris or Shanghai, there will be different ethnic groups coexisting and learning from each other. They can get along with each other without giving up their own social and cultural conventions and ways of life.

Second, cosmopolitanism does not necessarily intend to promote a sort of universalism: the former refers to a degree of endurance and moral attitude, and the latter appeals to a sort of consensus. In this sense, any country, be it powerful or weak, be it rich or poor and be it Western or Eastern, should be treated equally, and its social convention and cultural tradition should be respected since it belongs to a larger community. The same is even truer of human beings. No matter whether one is rich or poor, high or low in rank, or male or female in gender, he/she should be viewed equally relevant to our earth as we all live in a “global village.” If we apply this to the present mapping of world literature, we can easily find that non-Western literature is far from being treated equally in a Western-centric literary context.

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and the Future of Literature: An Interview with Professor Kjell Espmark, Chairman of the Nobel Committee), in Wang Ning, *Ersbishiji xifang wenxue bijiao yanjiu* (*Comparative Studies of Twentieth Century Western Literature*), Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2000, p. 402.

<sup>14</sup> As far as the relationship between cosmopolitanism and China, cf. Ning Wang ed., *Cosmopolitanism and China*, a special issue in *Telos*, 180 (Fall 2017).

Third, cosmopolitanism should not necessarily be the opposite of patriotism or nationalism, for a person might love both his country and the entire world. He, as a citizen of the world, should also love people of other countries apart from loving his own motherland and people. Furthermore, good human beings should not only love mankind, but also love every living thing on the earth. I think the above mentioned five novelists all have a global human concern, even though their writings are rooted deep in the national soil. They not only write for domestic readers, but also for all mankind. In this way, through the intermediary of translation, their works will become world literature. Their broad literary vision is also a sort of “rooted” cosmopolitan vision.

Fourth, to call for a sort of cosmopolitanism does not necessarily mean writing off the boundaries of countries or even national sovereignty. To me, as well as some other people who have a cosmopolitan horizon, there are two forms of cosmopolitanism: rooted cosmopolitanism and rootless cosmopolitanism. The former refers to those who are solidly nation-state based but who also have rich experiences in other countries. They are still deeply rooted in their own countries and have close relations with their native countrymen. The same is true of literary production and criticism. Writers should not only write for their domestic readers, but also for their potential international audience. Critics should not only discuss the literary phenomena that appear in their own countries, but also should deal with some fundamental theoretical issues in world literature.

Last but not least, there should be no such thing as singular universal cosmopolitanism, as it manifests itself in different forms and should thereby develop in a pluralistic orientation. In modern China, there once appeared a sort of New Humanist movement as a counter-narrative to the New Culture Movement. That movement’s “central mission was to find a universally applicable code for humanity based on traditional philosophical teachings of the East and the West.”<sup>15</sup> However, due to the inappropriate “universal” intention, it gradually faded before dominating the then Chinese cultural and intellectual circles, for China’s humanism is both a “translated” humanism from the West as well as a natural born one from Confucian doctrine. Therefore, when we talk about cosmopolitanism in the Chinese context, we are actually rooted in the Chinese cultural context, but at the same time, have a broad global human concern for the people of the world.

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<sup>15</sup> Li Tonglu, “New Humanism,” *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (2008), pp. 61-79, especially p. 62.

We still remember that in 2008, the slogan of the Beijing Olympic Games was “One World, One Dream.” That is, people of all countries live in one world although in different regions and continents with different cultural conventions and religious beliefs. The same is true of their dream: one common dream of becoming peaceful and flourishing although there might be different ways of realizing this dream. The China Dream we are talking about in the Chinese context now appeals to the collective prosperity of the whole Chinese nation, while the American Dream appeals to the success of individuals who work hard and achieve success at last no matter what their class origin or ethnicity might be. In this concluding part, I will just elaborate a bit about China’s literary studies in the context of the “Belt and Road.”

As I have already indicated, the initiative of the “Belt and Road” refers to “the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road,” which points to a new orientation not only for the Chinese economy, but also for Chinese culture which should “demarginalize” itself in an attempt to have a wider influence in the world. Since literature is the highest quality product of culture, what does it mean to China’s literary studies? My understanding is simply this. In the past, we have borrowed lots of Western theories and research methodologies in order to get China’s comparative literature started. It is certainly necessary and will continue in the future. However, it is far from enough and by no means our final goal. Since the Silk Road in ancient times might be regarded as another direction of globalization from East to West, the initiative of “Belt and Road” we are practicing today will all the more stimulate China’s literary production and comparative literature studies. It calls us not only to contribute to our domestic readers and scholarship but also to a wider international audience and scholarship. In this respect, we comparatists should contribute even more to humanity.



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