

Book Review

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David Der-wei Wang, ed.

A New Literary History of Modern China

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The latest work of David Wang, one of the leading scholars in the field of modern and contemporary Chinese-language literature, offers much food for thought. Above all, it gives us a new perspective for the analysis and study of Chinese literature of the last four centuries.

This volume is the product of a big and daring collective enterprise. Its more than a thousand densely-written pages were brought into being by more than 140 scholars and writers from all over the world. Its highly varied essays (around 160) are dedicated to significant literary and historical subjects, and also to forms of expression usually neglected as “less significant.” The book touches on numerous aspects of Chinese history from the years immediately preceding the beginning of the Qing dynasty (1644 -1911) up until the present.

It is at once clear from the table of contents that the book is the result of an entirely original approach compared to standard literary histories, with their

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chapters on authors, movements, and works in an exclusively chronological order. *A New Literary History of Modern China* unfolds the literary history of the last four centuries along two tracks that sometimes run parallel, sometimes cross, sometimes entwine: in addition to important authors, events, works and movements treated in chronological order, the volume includes meetings, dates, and minor events related to historical phenomena that are central to literary history.

The essays for the most part have an average length of five pages, and are organized along a time line. Each is preceded by a date, or sometimes two or three dates far apart, a method that underlines the close link between history and literature. Every article is accompanied by an essential bibliography and refers to a literary or historical event, or sometimes events that are at once both literary and historical, as is the case of Andrew Schonebaum's "Anticipatory Modernity versus Imaginary Nostalgia" (51-55), in which the mission of Macartney (1792) to the court of the emperor Qianlong of the Qing dynasty is presented along with the publication of Cao Xueqin's novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1792), analyzing both events as the possible beginnings of modernity.

This type of structure finds a theoretical explanation in Walter Benjamin's idea of *constellations*, based on the possibility of identifying or establishing historical, textual, and phenomenal connections through the presentation and juxtaposition of facts, quotations and events in a hermeneutical and non-classificatory manner. It is an approach that breaks the chain of linear and progressive temporal explanations. As a result, some contributions bear more than one date, and these dates often are distant in time from one another and are linked to occurrences of diverse types. Such a framework shows that the single event is not isolated but is in resonance or consonance with the whole. The juxtaposition of apparently unrelated facts, events, and references can engender entirely new interpretations in literary history, illuminating aspects hitherto ignored by conventional histories.

David Wang intends the volume to help the reader look at modern Chinese literature with new tools in a broader perspective, one engendered by a richly articulated complex of internal and external agents, both central and peripheral, that have interacted dynamically in the process of developing modern literature, a process marked by moments of stasis as well as of evolution. As Wang puts it, the volume “... proposes to view Chinese literary modernization not as a monolithic process ... but as a process with multiple entry points and ruptures” (3).

The tome’s elaborate organization reflects Wang’s goal of rethinking and discussing a new conventional assumptions about modern Chinese-language literature, and to consider more deeply the limitations imposed by the usual subdivision into literary genres, whose boundaries are broadened in this volume to include a wide spectrum of other modes of expression. Along with fiction and prose, poetry and theater, we have letters and diaries, official speeches and cartoons, films and internet and pop songs, all explored and analyzed as aesthetic expressions displaying the spirit of an age. These new elements enrich our understanding of a period.

This breaking out of the confines of conventional research has a foundation in the traditional Chinese concepts of *wen* (ornamentation, pattern, sign, civilization) “as a cosmic pattern ... as a manifestation of the heart and the world” and of *wenxue* (literature) as “... an art of registering, and being registered by, the incessant metamorphosis of forms, thoughts, and attitudes over times and spaces.”¹ Wang argues in this volume that “Modern Chinese literature continues an implicit dialogue with the traditional concepts of *wen* and *wenxue*. That is to say, writers and readers of Chinese literature tend to associate literary exercises not only with the endeavour of using the word to represent the world, but also with the continued process of illuminating a

1 See David Der-wei Wang. “Chinese Literary Thought in Modern Times: Three Encounters,” in Carlos Rojas and Andrea Bachner, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Chinese Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 599.

cosmic pattern ...” (4-5). As Kwok Kou Leonard Chan points out, literature in its textual and contextual form thus is viewed as *representation* and *manifestation* of the cosmos (190-195).

Wang also calls into question the very definition of “Chinese literature” as a *national* literature, associated exclusively with the literary production of continental China, and proposes to widen the horizon of research to include a literature that we could define as that which is “written in the Chinese language,” in a more complex and articulated vision that takes into account a new and varied cultural configuration, one with transnational characteristics including the various Chinese communities throughout the world.

The wealth of themes and the stimuli to reflection provided by the contributors to this volume bear witness to the stage where we find ourselves now, after the collective exploration of modern Chinese-language literature, undertaken in the 1960s with the milestone publication in modern literature studies, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, by C.T. Hsia 夏志清. Research has been enriched in the last few decades by the development of literary studies on China, by studies in comparative literature, by post-colonial studies, and by interdisciplinary research, as well as by the numerous contributions of scholars and intellectuals analyzing Chinese culture in the academic world, especially in the United States.

In the rich diversity of its contributions, the book reflects two main desires: the will to question the concept of modernity in its origin and meaning, its forms and expressions; and the intent to reflect on the definition of “Chinese” literature, taking into account fundamental parameters such as the question of whether China is a cultural entity, a political entity, or an imaginary community, along with the question of whether “Chinese” literature should rather refer to a heterogeneous body of expressions linked to continental China, without however excluding the variety and complexity of peripheral expressions within and outside the country.

In showing the multiple paths the process of modernization has followed,

the book raises some questions about the concept of modernity itself: to what degree does it respond to the spirit of the times and to a circulation of ideas on the planetary level? Is modernity an imported conceptual entity, the product of translations and trans-cultural transactions? Or does it express an internal need for renewal in response to external stimuli, assuming local characteristics in the course of its development? The latter viewpoint seems to be that of David Wang, who writes in the introduction: “literary modernity may arise in response to the shared global phenomena of political and technological modernization, but it needs not to repeat the same predetermined order or content” (3).

In this sense, the choice of opening the volume with Li Sher-shiueh’s essay “The Multiple Beginnings of Modern Chinese ‘Literature’” (29-35), which bears three dates from two centuries (1635, 1932 and 1934) and which concerns events of different natures as potential beginnings of modernity, appears particularly meaningful. The year 1635 was that of the posthumous publication of a pamphlet of Yang Tingyun 楊廷筠 (1562-1627), a Confucian convert to Catholicism, who, inspired by what had happened in the western world, proposed a new conception of “literature” broader than the traditional one. His vision embraced – in addition to the canonical texts – new subjects, forms, and disciplines, such as linguistic education, aesthetics, pedagogy and literary creation. The other dates registered are those of a speech made in 1932 by Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885-1967), one of the most characteristic figures of the New Movement in literature, and 1934, the year in which the Marxist historian Ji Wenfu 嵇文甫 (1895-1963) published *Zuopai Wangxue* 左派王學 (*The Leftist School of the Wang Yangming Thought*), a study of the ideas of Wang Yangming (1472-1529). Both Zhou and Ji identify signals of literary modernity in the late Ming era (1368-1644): Zhou Zuoren stresses humanism and the idea of individual emancipation present in the Gong’an and Jingling literary schools, perceiving in the autochthonous culture an attention and sensibility for “the life of man” that appears in much of the literature

of the first two decades of the 20th Century. Ji Wenfu in turn notes signs of revolutionary impulses as early as the late Ming period.

Many of the book's essays indicate other candidates as the beginnings of modernity in its various manifestations, for example with the forerunners of women's emancipation and the increasing centrality of female figures in the fiction dealt with by Carlos Rojas (69-74). Rojas names the novels *Jing hua yuan* 鏡花緣 (*Flowers in the Mirror*) by Li Ruzhen 李汝珍 (1763-1830), which takes on the theme of travel-exile as discovery and growth in contact with new worlds, cultures and realities, and *Nie hai hua* 孽海花 (*Flowers in a Sinful Sea*) by Zeng Pu 曾樸 (1872-1935), inspired by the figure of the courtesan Sai Jinhua 賽金花 (1872-1936) who had a central role in saving Beijing from destruction during the Boxer Rebellion (1900). Analysis of the use of local dialects and the vernacular in the fiction of the second half of the 19th Century, in novels like *Haishang hua liezhuan* 海上花列傳 (*Lives of Shanghai Flowers*) by Han Banqing 韓邦慶 (1856-1894) and *Haishang fanhua meng* 海上繁華夢 (*Dreams of Shanghai Splendor*) by Sun Yusheng 孫玉聲 (?-1939), suggests that these works foreshadow forms of communication and writing in a modernity that will then blossom only a few decades later (Alexander Des Forges, 133-139).

The volume refutes the current paradigm according to which modern literature began with the May Fourth Movement of 1919, and it likewise refutes the positivist conception of a progressive and uniform linear literary development, an idea supported by intellectuals and critics of a Marxist persuasion as useful to the Communist's political agenda. The distinction between pre-modern literature (1840-1919), modern literature (1919-1949) and contemporary literature (1949-) is in fact based, as Chen Sihe argues "on the Communist narrative of Chinese revolutionary history" (797-803). The May Fourth Movement was not so much, as Michel Hockx affirms, a literary event as a political one, and its canonization as the date of birth of modern literature was an a posteriori political choice. Significant references to student

demonstrations in Beijing and other parts of China in 1919 are effectively—Hockx observes – and completely absent in the works of the protagonists of the Movement, while they appear, on the other hand, in writings of well-known authors of the group of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies (265-271), whose supposed traditionalism and conservatism were principal targets of the writers who embraced the Movement’s cause.

The objective of *A New Literary History of Modern China* is to open a new vision of Chinese literature, no longer limited by nationality enshrined within geographical confines, but rather by reference to the tool of expression used: the written Chinese language, an important factor of cultural cohesion and continuity that goes beyond national and ethnic borders, thus offering a far more complex and variegated perspective of Chinese-language literature than those sanctioned by the People’s Republic or the Republic of China, Taiwan.

Evoking the notion of *worlding* coined by Heidegger, Wang conceives “Chinese” literature as an enterprise in a state of constant evolution, “an agency that continuously opens up new configurations of the world” (14) with transnational characteristics. This concept had in fact already appeared at the time of Goethe, and was then taken up by Marx and Engels in 1848, as Franco Moretti points out, “National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the many national and local literatures a world literature arises.”²

Ultimately, David Wang proposes a definition of Sinophone literature understood as a heterogeneous body of literary expressions in the Sinitic languages and dialects produced within and outside China. Especially interesting in this context is the essay on the discovery of poems inscribed into the walls of the detention building in the Angel Island Immigration Station by anonymous Chinese detainees, a group of uneducated Cantonese-speaking rural migrants. These offer a diasporic and non-elite model for thinking

2 Franco Moretti “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* (2000.1), 54.

about Chinese literature (Steven Yao, 691-697). Also noted is the narrative production of Malayan Chinese writers, including Li Yongping 李永平, who from their positions in the diaspora offer interesting insights into the history of migration, colonialism, imperialism, and postcolonial development (Alison M. Gropp, 906-911). Then too there are the voices of minority ethnic groups living within China itself (Mark Bender, 946-951).

This volume of in-depth and up-to-date studies is clearly an indispensable tool for scholars working in the field and for all those interested in Chinese-language literature. It is part of a series of literary histories published by Harvard University Press since the year 1998, and has the same format and layout of the other volumes (*A New History of French Literature*, *A New History of German Literature*, and *A New Literary History of America*). Nevertheless, given the wealth of contributions and the countless references to authors and works, it would have been highly useful for Sinologists to have also indices for authors and for the titles of works in the Chinese language, even though that would add many more pages to an already voluminous book.

A last observation regarding the format of the series: the volume is bit hefty and difficult to manage, so that dividing it into two volumes of a smaller format (however problematic from the point of view of contents) would have made possible a more agile use.