

## Introduction

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Published online: 29 June 2016  
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In almost all the textbooks published in mainland China on the history of Chinese literature, the term “contemporary” is used to refer to the period after 1949, when the People’s Republic of China was founded. Unlike most Chinese colleagues of literary studies, I use the term “contemporary” here not to describe all the literary phenomena from 1949 till now, or those in the era of China’s opening up and economic reform. Since the latter part of the 1970s, Chinese literature has undoubtedly taken on a new look, and Chinese literature from 1949 to 1975 should be regarded as part of its modern literature. Thus contemporary Chinese fiction as discussed in the present special collection of articles refers exclusively to the fiction produced during the period from the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, up to the present day.

Also unlike many essays published in English journals, those included in this special collection will analyze some of the selected fictions chiefly from a narrative and stylistic perspective to fill a gap in contemporary Chinese fiction studies in the English speaking world. But to those who are not familiar with Chinese literary history, it is necessary first to say a few words about contemporary Chinese fiction. Actually, we view the fictional works published before that time as modern Chinese fiction starting from 1919 when the New Culture and Literature Movement started sometime before it. The cultural and literary atmosphere during that period was, to many people, most open to the outside world, except that during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when almost no literature was produced in mainland China. During the period following the Cultural Revolution, almost all the major

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Western literary currents, academic thoughts and cultural and theoretical trends flooded into China through translation and critical introduction. Although some overseas sinologists have done substantial research in the literature of this period, far too little has been done in terms of a narrative and stylistic perspective on Chinese fiction in the present era. Yet one of the characteristic features of contemporary Chinese avant-garde fiction is linguistic experimentation with the narrative language similar to that practiced by the Western postmodernist writers.

So in this special collection, I, as guest editor, first try to re-examine Chinese fiction after the Cultural Revolution, which it is helpful to examine within the framework of global culture or world literature. The traditional writing of modern and contemporary Chinese literary history has a fatal shortcoming: namely, politically oriented literary historians always identify literary history with political or ideological history, thus ignoring the internal logic and law of the development of literature and culture proper. The two high tides of the modernist movement in twentieth century Chinese literature have proved this. Since I edited another special collection of articles on modern Chinese fiction in *Neohelicon* (37.2 [2010]) several years ago, essays which chiefly deal with Chinese fiction in a historical context, so in this special collection the essays mostly focus on contemporary Chinese fiction from stylistic and narrative perspectives, for such studies are indeed very rare but quite necessary.

As we know, Chinese literature has a long history and splendid cultural and aesthetic heritage. But with the swift development of the Western countries after the Renaissance, Chinese culture and literature were for a long time marginalized on the map of world literature. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese literary scholars increasingly became aware of this marginalization, thus launching a large-scale translation in the early twentieth century, translating numerous Western literary and theoretical works into Chinese, which certainly brought about a revolutionary change in modern Chinese literary language and narrative discourse.

This is one of the important reasons why some conservative scholars severely accuse the May 4th Movement (1919) of starting a sort of cultural “colonization” and linguistic “Europeanization”. Today’s scholars of modern Chinese literature, no matter what attitudes they might take toward the May 4th Movement, will probably not question that it was the beginning of modern Chinese literature. As for the end of this period, it makes sense to see it as coinciding with the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, rather than the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, not only because it coincides with the logic of literary periodization, but more because of the broad context of world literature of which Chinese literature should be regarded as a part. Furthermore, reading the fictional works after 1976, reveals a drastic change not only in content but also in narrative discourse. In this respect, the Western influence, especially that of modernism and postmodernism, is responsible. Since many books or articles have already dealt with contemporary Chinese fiction from political and aesthetic perspectives, the articles in this special edition will exclusively address it from the perspective of narrative and stylistic theories, for while literary currents and thoughts might well fall out of fashion, narrative and stylistic features will remain valuable for writers of the later generations to learn from and for scholars to analyze.

After 1976, there appeared the second high tide of “openness” and “moving toward the world” in Chinese literature, or the so-called second “overall Westernization”, as some overseas scholars have described it. We can easily see the difference between the beginning of the first “overall Westernization” in 1919 and that of the second in 1976. While the former is characterized by a sort of modernity, and the latter has a kind of postmodernity, if we do not seek to separate the two completely. That is, despite the huge difference between the modern and postmodern even in the Western context, the postmodern should be observed within the broad context of the modern, for it still has close connections with it. In China, this is even more apparent: after 1976, contemporary Chinese literature is called New Period literature, and has different cultural codes that co-exist rather than only one code dominating over literary writing. As a result, contemporary Chinese literature is closer to the mainstream of world literature, moving toward the world in a more conscious way, in the process of which it is carrying on dialogues with literatures of all countries, especially Western ones, and trying to be important part of world literature. As Chinese literature in the contemporary era is still developing, we put the debate about the historical issue aside, as in the present special edition the authors mostly focus on those “canonical” novels or stories whose authors have widely experimented with language and narrative techniques, and whose writings have not become historical phenomena and cannot influence our critical discussion and scholarly research any more.

Biwu Shang deals with contemporary time travel fiction, which is seldom discussed even among domestic Chinese literary critics and scholars, from a narratological perspective. To him, the boom of this new narrative genre has been largely fueled by the so-called “postmodernist turn” coupled with the “historiographical turn” as its direct consequence. For literary scholars, we cannot read these novels in a traditional way, but rather in a different way, as they have some new patterns which challenge traditional reading habits. He thinks that the inherent tensions and conflicts and their consequential unnaturalness all make it distinctive in the arena of world literature.

Mo Yan has become one of the most studied contemporary Chinese novelists after receiving the Nobel Prize in 2012, but Lanlan Du treats one of his most controversial novels *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* by combining a feminist approach and stylistic analysis, in an attempt to argue that a close reading and analysis of Mo Yan’s gendered treatment of suffering and his deft writing techniques will greatly help readers to have a thorough understanding of the novel. Since Mo Yan is especially good at narrating an unbelievable story into a believable one, Du even suggests reading it as an allegorical story of China’s national trauma characterized by women’s suffering and self-sacrificial spirit.

Yan Lianke is another prestigious Chinese novelist whose international reputation and influence is on a par with that of Mo Yan. In this collection, two essays deal exclusively with him, focusing on two of his fictional works. The first, by Jinghui Wang, analyzes Yan’s novelette *Serve the People*, in which readers will easily recognize the intertextual relations with Mao Zedong’s famous essay “Serve the People”, although it is written in a parodic and ironic way. In reading the two pieces in a comparative way, Wang seeks to raise the questions: “Who are ‘the

people’?” Does serving the people for a soldier mean serving a high ranking military officer? If so, where is Mao’s spiritual heritage left behind him? Yan does not give any answer in the novelette, which allows readers to give full play to their imagination.

The second, by Jincai Yang, closely reads and interprets Yan’s novel, which is even more absurdly written: villagers in *Dream of Ding Village* are crazy about making money at the expense of their blood or even their lives. What Yan satirizes in his novel is that by pursuing their dream, peasants are willing to sacrifice their blood and even their lives to have such a meaningless happy and wealthy existence. Such is the dream of Ding Village, which is actually a microcosm of entire China, whose people are eager to become rich after long poverty to such an extent that they even do not think of cherishing their own life and living environment. This is really tragic for human beings today.

Yu Hua used to be an eminent avant-garde novelist active mostly in the 1980s, and good at experimenting with writing techniques. Since the 1990s, he has become more and more realistically oriented and critical of the present-day Chinese social realities. But even so, he still attaches importance to narrative innovation. In this special collection, Yiju Huang discusses one of his most recent novels, *The Seventh Day*, which marks the “return of ghosts to the contemporary literary landscape”. Unlike in his early career, in which he was mostly inspired by his Western precursors like Kafka and Faulkner, in this novel, according to Huang, more elements of “historical ghosts” are handled by the novelist with his unique avant-garde techniques. This is true of many contemporary Chinese novelists, who were once largely influenced by Western modernism and postmodernism, and who now try to return to its own narrative tradition of Chinese literature.

In the last two essays, two non-fictional works are dealt with in a strictly narratological way. To Zongxin Feng, the short story written by a little known novelist Xu Yiguo seems to be written in a random way. But by “creating trivial characters and telling uneventful happenings in scattered and seemingly disordered pieces”, its author has actually “created a new form of narrative”, which deserves to be analyzed from a narratological perspective. Thus Feng argues that Xu artfully shows rather than tells that “life is more realistic in the eyes of a child and is richer and more colorful in fragments”. As a literary work, it should also record what has actually happened in real life. Xu’s writing technique reminds us of the avant-garde literary experimentation practiced by those influenced by postmodernism in the 1980s. To Feng, it “enriches the definition of narrativity”, and “challenges the notion of literature and refreshes the reader’s schema for literary reading”.

Xu and Liang’s essay also deals with a non-fictional work *We Three*, whose author is an eminent literary scholar, although not very well known as a writer. This short non-fictional work reveals different roles (sub-)paratext and its narrative play in different places as well as their special functions. To Xu and Liang, (sub-)paratext and (sub-)paratextual narrative, whether subordinate or not, not only play a crucial role in the works like *We Three*, but also offer a crystal lens, through which both the style and meaning of the text proper could be revealed in a different way. The change of the roles the textual and the paratextual narrative play, as best exemplified in Appendix One of *We Three*, in the final analysis, forms a unique narrative

strategy in Yang Jiang's autobiographic narrative in question. Their way of interpreting this short work is indeed unique even in Chinese context.

All the authors contributing to this special edition have been well-educated both in China and in Euro-American universities, are very familiar with various Western narrative theories, and have made careful studies in contemporary Chinese fiction. Their contributions will offer new interpretations of several important novels from unique narrative and stylistic perspectives. In order to help non-Chinese speaking readers to better understand contemporary Chinese fiction, I have invited Marshall Brown, who is an eminent American comparatist and who has been more and more interested in contemporary Chinese novels in recent years, to offer his commentary on each of the essays from a Western and comparative perspective so that a new theoretical dialogue between Chinese and Western literary scholarship will emerge.