

One Kind of Reality: Mapping out Chinese “Postmodernism”^{*}

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This paper outlines the literary context and developments in post-1980s China, and seeks to map out Chinese postmodernism. It discusses the problematic existence of “Chinese postmodernism” by taking into account the more general postmodernity of Chinese society. The result is a view of postmodernism that is flexible, critical, historically and culturally situated and ethically sensitive without being dogmatic or propagandistic. This in turn will offer a basis for further study of “postmodernisms” as they have developed both in the countries of the concept’s origin and elsewhere.

Keywords: Chinese postmodernism, literary context, Chinese literature

The term “postmodernism” appeared in China in the mid-1980s, but the introduction of concepts and theories that could be termed “postmodern” can be dated much earlier. With the expansion of translation of postmodern works and theories, the impact of postmodern studies also grew. Though Chinese critics did not recognize that there was a Chinese postmodernism, postmodernism had been quite extensively studied and practiced in China before 1985.

Introduction of Postmodernism into China

The first scholar who could be seen to work explicitly with this concept was Dong Dingshan, who published an article entitled “Suowei ‘houxiandai pai’ xiaoshuo” (trans. “So-Called Postmodern Fictions”) in the magazine *Dushu* (trans. *Reading*) in December 1980. In this article, he presents the basic concepts of postmodernism and introduces postmodern fiction to Chinese readers. Subsequently, Yuan Kejia published “Guanyu ‘houxiandai zhuyi’ sichao” (trans. “On Postmodern Thoughts”) in the journal *Guowai shehui kexue* (trans. *Social Science Abroad*), a more comprehensive introduction to the history of postmodernism and postmodernist concepts. In terms of the translation of literary criticism and cultural theories, in addition to the translations of contemporary Western writings on aesthetics edited by Li Zehou, there were also translated versions of *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1980) by Terry Eagleton and *Theory of Literature* (1984) by Rene Wellek.

The introduction and establishment of the theory of postmodernism in China continued with a series of lectures on “Postmodernism and Cultural Theories” given by Fredric Jameson at Beijing University in 1985. His speeches were then published by a number of publishing houses as the book *Houxiandai zhuyi yu wenhua lilun* (trans. *Postmodernism and Cultural Theories*), thus becoming the first book to introduce postmodern cultural theories in a complete form to mainland China. The book attracted wide attention in artistic and literary circles

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and made such terms as “decentred” and “deconstruction” known to and popular in the field of literary criticism. As Foucault, Derrida, and Bell were introduced into China, the circulation of the central concepts of postmodernist theory caused great debates in 1980s China. The theories of postmodernist thinkers such as Jameson, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, and Barthes were all the rage at that time. Due to the influence of this trend, a postmodern tendency emerged in Chinese literature, and deconstructive discourse became main stream within the circle of literature.

Is There a Postmodernism in China?

Raymond Williams proposed the theoretical system of Cultural Materialism. The theoretical core of Cultural Materialism aims to reveal the material character of literature and culture and emphasizes the close relationship between literature and other related human activities. This is, however, a rewriting of Williams’ earlier idea that “culture is ordinary” (1958, pp. 3-14). The aim here was to give prominence to the material power of culture and literature in the process of human history. In the rewriting, Williams not only casts doubt on the traditional theories of “Reflection and Aestheticism” but also constructs literary (or cultural) concepts on the basis of Historical Semiotics within a strategy of “historicizing” linguistic fashions.

On the basis of a Marxist conception of totality and hegemony, Williams proposes the cultural hypothesis of a dynamic structure. In Williams’ eyes, the dynamic process of culture is, diachronically and synchronically, the result of a hegemonic dispute among three simultaneously-present cultural trends or currents: a dominant culture, a residual culture, and an emergent culture (1977, pp. 121-127). The “authentic historical analysis” of concrete cultural texts or forms is to clarify the “structures of feeling” (1977, pp. 128-135) that informs actual textual forms; that is, to explore in these textual forms the simultaneously existing, but heterogeneous and oppositional cultural elements, especially the revolutionary element, so as to develop the formal analysis of texts into a cultural, social, and historical analysis, and thus bring features of the “sociology of culture” to literary studies (1977, pp. 136-141).

The complex situation in which Williams is engaged in his writing is comprised of many factors. One of them is the historical contradiction of Britain: its emphasis on technological innovation and a radical reality fraught with wars, revolution, and riots in the 20th century. Williams’ literary criticism, like all his other writing, represents the convergence of British national tradition, Marxist political themes, and Williams’ personal life experience within the environment of British capitalism.

It is true that in the structure of any actual society, and especially in its class structures, there is always a social basis for elements of the cultural process that are alternative or oppositional to the dominant elements (1977, p. 124).

If this is true of the west, it is also the situation in China since the 1980s. When Jameson, Bell, Harvey, and other postmodern theorists have elaborated on the division of economics from political science in postmodernism, they have done so by mentioning the relationship of postmodernism to transnational capitalism or post-industrial society (i.e., the “information-based” society).

As early as the late 1980s, western and Chinese critics had already placed Chinese literature within a postmodern context, believing that some postmodern ideas correspond to those developed independently in traditional Chinese Taoist and Confucian philosophies. On the one hand, the tenets of postmodern thought that

argue for a lack of fixed meaning have much in common with traditional Taoist thinking¹; on the other, there are elements here of an attempt to make postmodernism seem less foreign and more acceptable in China². Indeed, such critical opinion regarded cultural postmodernism as already having reached a high level of development when the process of economic modernization had not yet finished in China. With regard to the use of postmodern critical discourses, these critics have tended to adopt one of the following attitudes: to support, to oppose, to remain hesitant, or to claim a conditional acceptance. However, many problems remain.

The first question is how postmodernism is to be understood, especially when it is placed in the Chinese context. In addition, some Chinese theorists such as Yuan Kejia and Wang Ning regarded avant-garde and “rascal” novelists as representatives of Chinese postmodern literature and offered the works of Ma Yuan, Yu Hua, Ge Fei, Mo Yan, Wang Shuo, and others as evidence. This raises another question: Can we simply label these works as “postmodern” because some features of postmodern fiction are found in their works, such as intertextuality and collage? The third issue is that some theorists confuse postmodernism with popular culture, or even modernism, when they intend to differentiate popular culture from elite culture (1984). Are works of popular culture postmodern writing, or merely modern writing? Furthermore, some articles directly link modernism to the radical avant-garde, but link postmodernism to pejorative and moralizing labels such as “decadence”, “corruption”, and “vulgarity”, and in doing so, divide modernism from postmodernism, ignoring the intrinsic link between the two.³ All these definitions seem too subjective. The purpose of this section, then, is to examine the question of Chinese literary “postmodernism”, and of “postmodernity” in the Chinese context.

Since the introduction of postmodern theories and concepts into China in the 1980s, the theoretical study of postmodernism and the application of postmodernism in cultural and literary discourses have been subject to criticism. In addition, China is now riding the wave of the contemporary globalization of economy, culture, and information. The rapid development of China’s consumer culture since the 1990s has led to great changes in the attitudes of the Chinese people towards consumption, and their lifestyle and cultural perspectives. Accordingly, the identities of writers, the nature of their literary creations, and the status of literature are facing an unprecedented crisis that has been precipitated by the recent great economic strides made by the market economy in China. Buzzwords such as “desire”, “market”, “entertainment”, and “fashion” mark the defining themes of the era, whereas they had been neglected or repressed during Mao’s era. As a result, “postmodernity” now seems in a sense to be the natural mode of contemporary China.

However, there is no necessary connection between a postmodern social and economic context and a postmodern literature. Sometimes, as in China in the late 1980s, the possibility exists for a postmodern context to fail to produce a genuinely postmodern literature. At other times, we seem to see aspects of a “postmodern” literature without a general postmodern context.

As the theorist who is most often associated with the term “postmodern”, and one of the thinkers whom

¹ David Hall claims that classical Chinese thought, particularly some specific Taoist and Confucian ideas, is “postmodern” in character. See David Hall, “Modern China and the Postmodern West” in *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 512-519.

² Chinese critics have also found connections between postmodernism and classical Chinese philosophy. See, for instance, Meng Binbin (2007), “Ruxue yu hou xiandai” (trans. “Confucianism and Postmodernism”), *Guoji xueshu dongtai* (trans. *International Academic Development*), 5, 1-3.

³ For example, Huang Youbo (2005) argues that postmodernism was not welcomed or needed in China because of its destructive implications for and negation of Chinese culture, “Dui houxiandai zhuyi de pipan” (trans. “Criticism of Postmodernism”), *Guoji xueshu jiaoliu* (trans. *International Academic Exchange*), 12; Shen Yubing, *Ershi shiji yishu piping* (trans. *Art Criticism in the 20th Century*) (Beijing: The China Academy of Art Press, 2003).

Habermas attacks in *Modernity—An Incomplete Project*, Lyotard describes the postmodern as a matter of *aesthetic style* rather than historical periodization:

What, then, is the postmodern? [...] It is undoubtedly a part of the modern. [...] A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant. (1993, p. 44)

We note from this perspective that some works written by novelists who lived several centuries ago share features in common with what Lyotard characterizes today as the postmodern, such as Thomas Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1761-1767), with its persistent habit of destabilizing 18th-century notions of identity and narrative. As Linda Hutcheon has also noted, “self-conscious metafiction has been with us for a long time, probably since Homer and certainly since *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy*” (1996, p. 41).

Any deliberate equating of the modern and postmodern commits the same mistake with regard to literature as it does in characterizing historical era. On the other hand, this situation implies the replacement of a unique Chinese context with a single, global postmodern context. The fact that we recognize that there is a postmodern context in China does not mean that this context is dominant and pervasive; on the contrary, it is “a relatively thin part” in China (2005, pp. 46-49). The complex context of China today is the coexistence of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern contexts, as well as the coexistence of mainstream culture, elite culture, and consumer culture. As Raymond Williams pointed out about the west during an earlier period, a model of dominant, residual, and emergent forces may also be used to explain the situation of Chinese literature since the 1980s. The complex interaction of socialist culture, Chinese classical culture, and western culture in China has not been made clear. Nothing is achieved simply by calling this a “postmodern” context.

To explain Chinese literature since the 1980s with reference solely to a theorized globalised postmodern context is too narrow and distorting a perspective. However, to view postmodernism as one of multiple discourse environments and to analyze the changes inside and outside literature in this environment is more productive. This is also the basis on which we may attempt a postmodern criticism and recognize the existence of a literary postmodernism in China.

The globalization of information flows is presented as a model for the deconstruction of a central discourse. Chinese postmodern fiction operates within such an environment. Of course, it is not logical to conclude that this literature is postmodern purely by virtue of the context under which it is produced. We can only say that the presentation of social and cultural conditions in postmodern works is closely related to the economic situation within which they are written. They are also connected with new ways of life, communication, and modes of transmission. Changes in information flow mechanisms form one of the aspects of postmodernity in China. It is very apparent that novels today are very different from earlier works written before the marketisation of economy and literature. These differences not only lie in literary texts themselves, but in their critical reception and the general social and economic environment. Postmodern literary criticism in China cannot only consider the internal environment of literature, but must also take into account the current development of China as a society. Literature is indeed inseparable from the economic tide of globalization and information flow: But if we are to avoid mechanically copying and indiscriminately applying western models of postmodern literary analysis, our critiques must be rooted in an understanding of the specific environment of China. China’s literary postmodernism and its postmodernist fiction are parts of a Chinese cultural and social matrix in which Chinese history and geophysical circumstances are embedded.

Another problem for the creators of a Chinese literary postmodernism has been the expansion of the postmodern context. As Professor Wang Jiren has pointed out, postmodernism in China overlaps with the “pre-modern” and modernism in Chinese history. It will have been a mistake to classify mainstream literature as postmodern.

No matter how Chinese society has changed since the 1980s, the three simultaneous factors of dominant, residual, and emergent have persisted, with each more powerful at different times. This model of analysis proves useful in the analysis of Chinese “rascal literature” in the 1980s, Yu Hua’s short fictions of the 1990s, and his big novels of the 2000s.

Postmodernity in Chinese Literature

Comparing the characteristic features and labels of postmodernism in the western context, such as pluralism, eclecticism, arbitrariness, rebellion, distortion, decentring, and deconstruction, Chinese scholars such as Wang Ning extracted from their study of signs in contemporary literature six features that they claim characterize literary postmodernism in China. These are: the disappearance of dualism; the expansion of meaning and centre of value; the disappearance of boundaries between pure literature and popular literature; parody; mimicry; and the flattening of affect (2004, pp. 250-258). This summary of features, while broad and in some senses strained, does grasp some of the realities of contemporary Chinese literature. It is a powerful weapon of deconstruction, being sceptical to all notions of principles and centres; it is also a game that may lead to the loss of real freedom behind the apparent gift of unlimited freedom. This parallels the situation in the wider context of Chinese society⁴.

By recalling the background for the emergence of postmodernism in the west, we note that postmodernism in culture emerged at the same time as the strengthening of authority in the areas of politics and a new authoritarian form of governance—the hegemony of technology and the media. Postmodernism embodies a fierce resistance to the new form of politics and the compromise after resistance in the west. Even in China today, this combination of resistance and compromise can also be found in many popular cultures with postmodern features. In this sense, postmodernist literature in China emerges as a direct reaction to new authoritarian structures.

Postmodernity, as an underlying cultural and economic condition, exists as a reality for the literary arts and cultural life in China. It is no longer the most important issue whether the term “postmodernism” can be used to denote the objective existence of a new phenomenon. More importantly, given that Chinese literature has clearly entered a new phase in which modernist and postmodernist strategies coexist, it is critical to find out what is needed and what can be done in terms of defining whether history is relevant to literary criticism: “Within the irregularities and overlaps of any cultural history—its repeated co-presence of various forms of the emergent with forms of the residual and the dominant—that definition of period and type has a working usefulness” (2001, p. 280).

Critics have paid particular attention in the avant-garde novels to the proportion of content in a text that displays/employs playfulness in language. Another feature of these novels is the self-doubt and irrational concerns experienced by readers after the loss of the centre. *Qing Huang*, *Enemy*, *Marginal*, and *Brown Birds* by Ge Fei are examples of novels in which the text is unfolded, revealing in the process doubts regarding reality and

⁴ In an article published on *The New York Times*, Yu Hua elaborates on the concept of freedom in China. Yu Hua, “The Spirit of May 35th”, *The New York Times*, 23 June 2011.

the world. In doing so, the writer make these novels appear to be typical postmodern literary texts in terms of narrative style and central concept: What emerges is the idea, consistent with postmodernism’s questioning of a hierarchy of values, that “whatever is, is fine”.

Of course, the perceived “postmodernity” of Chinese literature since the late 1980s is a consequence of many factors, such as language and structure. Postmodernist writing typically avoids such elements as fixed meaning, and this attitude leads naturally to themes of self-doubt and uncertainty. Similarly, since each unique narrative is constructed to oppose traditional narrative expectations, the selection of unusual and extreme life situations to launch the narrative is very important to writers such as Yu Hua and Ge Fei who, as avant-garde novelists in the 1980s, are visibly obsessed with such extreme themes as violence, disaster, crime, horror, and death. This, in the context of irrational concerns, has also become one of the most important features by means of which avant-garde novels foreground their postmodernity. Yu Hua’s novel *Brothers* and Ge Fei’s *Jiangnan Region Trilogy*, in contrast, established their position as exemplary texts of literary postmodernism in China of the 2000s by revealing Chinese postmodernity in its new phase in exploring a different subset of postmodern preoccupations such as consumerism, the media and technology.

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