

Reinterpreting Modern and Contemporary Chinese Novels: A Perspective of Fredric Jameson's Third-World Literature

WANG Guanzhi, DENG Wensheng, QUAN Yucheng, GUO Tongcan, TUNUKE Tailaiwu
Beijing Institute of Chemical Technology, Beijing, China

This paper explores the reception and application of Fredric Jameson's theory of third-world literature in the context of modern and contemporary Chinese novels. Since its first introduction to China in 1985, Fredric Jameson's theory has undergone a gradual process of dissemination, acceptance, and evaluation. This study provides a concise overview of how Jameson's concepts, particularly the notion of "national allegory", "political unconscious", and "ideological criticism", have been accepted in their entirety to reinterpret the novels, highlighting both the contributions and limitations of his theoretical framework. It also examines the various stages of Jameson's influence in China, from initial enthusiasm to critical reflection, and discusses how his ideas have been adapted to the Chinese context. The paper also addresses the critiques of Jameson's theory, including its Western-centrism, oversimplification of cultural diversity, lacking adaptability and flexibility, prominent ideological perspective, and potential neglect of literary aesthetics. By analyzing these dimensions, the paper aims to offer a balanced assessment of Jameson's impact on Chinese literary studies and suggest a more nuanced approach for future research, emphasizing the need for a culturally sensitive and interdisciplinary methodology to fully appreciate the complexity of modern and contemporary Chinese novels within the global literary landscape.

Keywords: modern and contemporary Chinese novels, Fredric Jameson, national allegory, third-world literature, ideology

Introduction

With the wave of globalization over the world, it is impossible for every nation to avoid cultural communication with others, and it is necessary and important to re-examine and reinterpret literary works from others' eyes in order to prompt mutual understanding and respect. Modern and contemporary Chinese novels are essential part and parcel of Chinese culture, so it is necessary for us to reconsider them in the new context, which have recorded the changes and upgrades of Chinese society from early 20th till 21st century. During the period of more than one hundred years, China has experienced a tremendous transformation from a feudal society to a socialist one. The transformations, reshaping the structure of Chinese society, have brought great impacts upon themes and forms of literature writing; it also has a big impact on the themes and forms of modern and contemporary Chinese novels. After the May 4th Movement (1919), Chinese literature began to emphasize on

WANG Guanzhi, School of Information Engineering, Beijing Institute of Chemical Technology, Beijing, China.
DENG Wensheng, Professor, Zhiyuan School (Liberal Arts), Beijing Institute of Chemical Technology, Beijing, China.
QUAN Yucheng, School of Mechanical Engineering, Beijing Institute of Chemical Technology, Beijing, China.
GUO Tongcan, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Beijing Institute of Chemical Technology, Beijing, China.
TUNUKE Tailaiwu, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Beijing Institute of Chemical Technology, Beijing, China.

individual independence, liberation, and anti-feudalism; following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese literature became a powerful tool for building socialist mansions, expressing the themes of collectivism and national construction; after the reform and opening-up to the world, economic transformations and social divides have brought new challenges and chances to literature writing, and literary works have started to explore cultural dimensions and individual destinies. Currently, cultural conflicts and integration are increasingly intensified by multinational capitalism under the circumstance of globalization, Chinese novels have shown its unique characteristics as "third-world literature" (Jameson, 1986). Fredric Jameson is renowned far and wide over the world; his theory of third-world literature, which was introduced to Chinese academia in 1985,¹ has provided us with a new perspective to study novels; his concepts of "national allegory", "political unconscious", and "ideological criticism" (Jameson, 1986) have given us some enlightenment to better understand modern and contemporary Chinese novels, i.e., how individual heroes of the novels have mirrored and reflected national destinies and collectivist experiences by individual narrations, what political and ideological dimensions are indicated in the novels. This paper aims to explore F. Jameson's theory of third-world literature, how we can reinterpret modern and contemporary novels through the theory, and define the place of the novels in the global literary system. The author of the paper hopes that this exploration will shed some light on the study of modern and contemporary Chinese novels and reevaluate the acceptance of Jameson's theory in China, thereby promoting and pushing the dialogue of literary theories between China and the West.

Given the profound transformations in Chinese society and the unique characteristics of modern and contemporary Chinese novels, it is essential for us Chinese scholars to explore new theoretical frameworks that can provide fresh insights into the literary works. One such framework is the theory of third-world literature offered by F. Jameson. His most influential work in China, *Postmodernism and Theories of Culture* (1997)², whose main contents were first introduced to Chinese academia in the 1980s, has provided a new lens through which can help us examine the complex interplay between literature and society in the context of globalization. In the following section, we will delve into Jameson's theory of third-world literature, exploring its key concepts and how they have been received and applied in Chinese academia.

Jameson's Theory of Third-World Literature

Dissemination and Acceptance of Jameson's Literary Theory in China

The dissemination and acceptance of Jameson's literary theory in China have witnessed a gradual process of introducing and deepening since 1980s. In 1985, Jameson was invited to give lectures in Peking University, whose main content was translated and published, entitled *Postmodernism and Theories of Culture* (1997). After the publication, Jameson has attracted Chinese scholars' eyes and received fervent attention. The event was compared with "the speeches delivered by Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) at Peking University in 1921"³ referred to by Yue Daiyun, a prominent figure in the field of comparative literature studies in China. In fact, Jameson's lectures on the introduction of theories of Postmodernist culture are closely related with his other important essays and speeches, published or released in the period of his academic journey in China, which marked the beginning

¹ F. Jameson was invited to Peking University to deliver a series of lectures as a visiting professor from September to December 1985.

² The book, based upon F. Jameson's speeches at Peking University, was published by Peking UP in 1997.

³ It refers to what Bertrand Russell delivered two lectures on mathematical logic, the analysis of mind, idealism, causality, relativity, gravitation, and symbolic logic at Peking University in 1921.

of introducing Jameson's theories in China. Obviously, Jameson's theories were introduced and disseminated by his speeches and publications. Moreover, after his journey to China in 1985, Jameson had other similar visits in China as well, not only he made speeches, but also took on numerous Chinese disciples and followers. Thus, he has disseminated Western theories to Chinese academy and interpreted his personal experiences in China. Overall, his communication of the theories in China can be divided into three stages as follows.

First, the initial or seeding stage. Roughly, the stage refers to the years from 1985 to 1990s. As mentioned above, Jameson paid his first visit to Peking University in 1985; his lectures initiated and ignited a wave of comprehensive study of Postmodernism in Chinese academic community. These lectures and speeches at Peking University were transcribed and published, titled *Postmodernism and Theories of Culture*. The work has become the introductory book for Chinese scholars to set foot on Postmodernism. Another key work, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Zhang, 1997a), which also has helped Chinese scholars better grasp Postmodernism, was understandably welcome after its publication. Because of Jameson's popularity, other influential works on Postmodernism, such as *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (Jencks, 1986) and *What Is Postmodernism?* (Jencks, 1996), were similarly well-received. Thus, F. Jameson, the name, including Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, has become an emblematic figure in talking about Postmodernism in the community. The events and publications laid foundation to the development of Jameson's theories in the future in China.

Second, the development or flowering stage, which covers the entire 1990s. During the period, with more translations and studies of Jameson's works, Jameson's theories have gained extensive influence in Chinese academic community, and become essential theoretical sources for cultural studies and literary criticism. Jameson's major works were translated and published, for example, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Jameson, 1991), *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism: Selected Papers of Fredric Jameson's Criticism* (Zhang, 1997b), and *Cultural Turn* (Jameson, 2000), and at the same time *Anthology of Fredric Jameson's Works* (Wang, 2004) was also being edited, which was not released until 2004; they are important readers and resources for the community to study Jameson. Thanks to the study, Chinese scholars have borne fruits of their own. They applied Jameson's theories to cultural studies and literary criticism, focusing on cultural phenomena and localization of Postmodernism in China. Therefore, two features in the community were highlighted: cultural turn and awareness of Chinese problems. The former refers to the scholars who tend to study or interpret something with cultural perspective; the latter means they tend to integrate Postmodernism with Chinese context, i.e., finding solutions to Chinese problems in a Postmodernist way. So a number of works related to these studies have emerged, such as *Cultural Study of Postmodernism* (Wang, 1992), *Culture and Aesthetics of Postmodernism* (Wang, 1994), *The Elusive Game: A Study of Postmodern Philosophical Trends* (Wang, 1998), which have mainly focused on Postmodernism, Jameson's theories, Chinese modernity, contemporary Chinese culture, or modern and contemporary Chinese literature respectively. After the second phase, Jameson's theories were rooted, flowering, and beginning to bear fruits in China.

Third, the summit and falling stage, which refers to the period from 2000 to the early 21st century. During this stage, Jameson's popularity in China reached its peak; Chinese scholars began to apply his theories to Chinese contexts, problems, and the localization of these theories. The identification with these theories was complex. On one hand, his theories were regarded as a new phase of growth in modernity; on the other hand, they led to a reexamination of modernity and traditional culture in China, particularly in Chinese literature. In the period, Jameson's influence was overarching and decisive, especially in the field of postmodernist cultural studies. His works continuously were translated and published, receiving high acclaim among scholars. In addition to *Cultural*

Turn (Jameson, 2000) mentioned above, other works such as *Anthology of Fredric Jameson's Works* (Wang, 2004) and *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (Jameson, 2008) were published, and they've provided us with intellectual nourishment.

Meanwhile, scholars started to rethink Jameson's theories and made some achievements as well. Works such as *The Reception of Western Postmodernism in China: A Forty-Year Journey and Its Issues* (Zeng, 2020), *Cultural Identity in the Age of Globalization: A Historical Reflection on Western Universalist Discourse* (Zhang, 2021), and *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Jameson, 2024) emerged. In the summit stage, Chinese scholars shifted their focus from mere acceptance to application and critical appraisal of the theories; his ideas of the political unconscious, third-world literature, and Euro-centrism, which are hidden behind his series of theories, are being challenged and questioned.

The Synopsis of Jameson's Third-World Literature Theory

F. Jameson's theory of third-world literature was expounded in his seminal paper, which was titled "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" published in *Social Text*, No. 15, in 1986. The theory is a significant contribution to the literary theories of post-colonialism and Marxism. In the paper, Jameson (1986) analyzes third-world literature and explores its unique characteristics and values within the context of multinational capitalism. He introduces the concept of "national allegory", which has spurred widespread discussion and debate (Jameson, 1986).

In Jameson's eyes, third-world literature is not a simple division judged by region or culture; instead it is tied to specific historical, political, and economic contexts. He (1986) argues that the defining characteristic of third-world literature lies in its nature as a "national allegory", which reflects the history and reality of the entire nation through individual stories. This literary form is not merely a simple personal narrative, but rather closely links individual experiences to the fate of the nation-state. Through the joys, sorrows, and struggles of individuals, it reveals the contradictions and conflicts of the entire society (Jameson, 1986).

National allegory is a core content of third-world literature. Jameson (1986) claims that national allegory of third-world literature is a special way of narration. It integrates individual desires and destinies with the fate of the nation-state. The allegory is not an obscure symbol but a direct and public expression of concern for nations, society, and history. In his paper, Jameson cites a short novel *The Diary of a Mad Man* (2022), written by Chinese writer Lu Xun (1881-1936), as an example to illustrate. In the novel Lu Xun reveals the "cannibalistic" nature of traditional Chinese society through the perspective of a madman. This work is not only a portrayal of an individual's psychological state but also a metaphor for the entire nation's history.

Jameson (1986) highlights that the production and evolution of third-world literature are tied to the settings of multinational capitalism. Multinational capitalism not only brings about economic penetration but also gives rise to conflicts and integration of culture. Jameson argues that third-world literature often borrows Western literature in form but reflects resistance to Western cultural imperialism in its content. The emergence of new literary forms serves both as a response to Western culture and as an exploration and affirmation of its own cultural identity.

Jameson (1986) highlights the differences between third-world literature and first-world literature. In his opinion, first-world literature pays more attention to the inner world and psychological description, while third-world literature stresses more national and societal experiences. Such differences are not simply dualistic contrasts, but are reflections of two kinds of different settings in history, economy, and culture.

Jameson (1986) claims that third-world literature plays important functions to enlighten the intellectuals in the first-world. By analyzing third-world literature, the readers of the first-world can better understand the complexities and diversities under the circumstances of globalization. Moreover, the form of “national allegory” also provides a new perspective to understand the cultural conflicts and clashes in global capitalism.

Jameson (1986) also remarks, there is a life-and-death struggle between first-world cultural imperialism and third-world culture, which reflects the economic conditions during the process of capital penetration and modernization in the regions. The struggle is involved in cultural levels as well as economic ones. Therefore, studying third-world culture needs reexamining ourselves from the outside perspectives because we might unconsciously become a force that affects the remnants of the old culture.

Having explored the key aspects of Jameson’s theory of third-world literature and its dissemination in China, we now turn our attention to the specific context of modern and contemporary Chinese novels. These novels, as an integral part of Chinese culture, reflect the profound social transformations and cultural evolution that have taken place in China over the past century. To better understand how Jameson’s theory can be applied to these works, it is crucial to first examine the major periods and themes in modern and contemporary Chinese literature. In the following section, we will provide an overview of these novels, highlighting their historical contexts and literary characteristics, which will lay the groundwork for our subsequent analysis through the lens of Jameson’s theory.

Modern and Contemporary Chinese Novels: An Overview

Chinese modern and contemporary novel is closely linked to China’s social developments and changes. Roughly speaking, it can be divided into several major periods as follows.

First period refers to the span between Late Qing Dynasty and the May Fourth Movement, which spans from the end of 19th century to early 20th century. The period marks the germination of modern Chinese fiction. During the Late Qing Dynasty, with vast amount of Western literature introduced into China, Liang Qichao (1873-1929), who was regarded as a representative figure of intellectuals of the time, initiated and championed “novel revolution”⁴ for stressing the functions of novels. In 1917, New Cultural Movement was rising; Hu Shi (1891-1962), Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), and other intellectuals, advocated the Vernacular Chinese Movement, which pushed and pulled literary transformation both in forms and contents. Taking Lu Xun’s (1881-1936) *The Diary of a Mad Man* as an example, which initiated the criticizing feudal rituals and wakening the common people, the work is identified as the first modern Chinese novel (2022).

Second period is the years from the May Fourth Movement to 1949. Throughout the 1920s, after the May Fourth Movement, modern Chinese novel writing rose to a diverse stage. These works were both criticisms of social reality and explorations of humanity and individual spirit. The works written by Lu Xun, Yu Dafu (1896-1945), Bing Xin (1900-1999), and other writers have shown diversity and depth. For example, Lu Xun’s works, particularly *The Diary of a Madman* and *The True Story of Ah Q* (2015), revealed the distortion of human nature and the pathology of society. Yu Dafu, embodied by his novel *Sinking*, described the individual solitude and melancholy caught up in the torrent of the era. Yu’s works are kind of autobiographical, focusing on the psychic

⁴ The “Revolution of the Novel” was a literary reform movement initiated by Liang Qichao in the late Qing Dynasty. It advocated elevating the status of novels and emphasizing their social and educational functions. The movement promoted the prosperity of novel writing and facilitated ideological enlightenment, though it also had limitations in overemphasizing the functions of the novel at the expense of artistry.

world. Bing Xin, from a female perspective, deliberately demonstrated her unique charm in her works, such as *To Young Readers* (2021), which focused on motherly love, children's innocence, and nature.

Moreover, native-soil literature reached its peak in the 1920s. Under the influence of Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967), Mao Dun (1896-1981), and others, it became an important phenomenon. Writers, by portraying life in rural areas, revealed not only the realistic problems of Chinese society but also their concerns and thoughts about the nation's future. During this period, novel writing not only made bold innovations in form but also profoundly reflected the various issues in social transformation, which laid a solid foundation for the development of modern literature. In 1930s, the Left-Wing literature has been emerging, which emphasized the hierarchical characters and social functions. Meanwhile, humanist literature is in its high time as well. Ba Jin's (1904-2005) *Family* (2018) and Mao Dun's *Midnight* (2020) are representative of the works to reflect humanist literature. Next, the decade in 1940s, in the era literature has become methods and means to propaganda anti-Japanese invasion. The literature of liberated regions stressed that literature serve the workers, peasants, and People's liberation Armies. The works, such as *The Marriage of Little Hei II* (2021) written by Zhao Shuli (1906-1970), embodied a new literary look, and reflected the changes in the liberated regions. Next, the period between 1949 and 1978 is also referred to as the socialist construction period. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, i.e., New China, socialist realism dominated the literary trend. Literary works were mainly centred on themes that reflected and represented socialist construction or class struggle. They emphasized the close connection between literature and political affairs in order to propagate socialist ideas and revolutionary spirit. Roughly, judged by the themes of novels in the period, the novels can be divided into three kinds. One category is novels of revolutionary history and themes, which constituted the majority of these works. Many of the works, set against the backdrop of revolutionary struggles led by the Communist Party of China, have depicted the people's awakening, resistance, and revolutionary victory. For instance, *Red Flag Flying* (2019) by Liang Bing (1914-1996), which centers on the peasants' struggle in the Central Plain of Hebei Province, portrays the awakening and resistance of the peasants from the Xinhai Revolution (1911-1912) to the Anti-Japanese Aggression War. Similarly, *Bitter Herbs* (2021) by Feng Deying (1935-2022), set in the Jiaodong Anti-Japanese Base Area, depicts the images of revolutionary people, represented by a mother. The other category is novels of rural themes. These works are an important part, reflecting the significant changes in the countryside during the construction and transformation of socialism. For example, *The Builders of a New Life* (2005) by Liu Qing (1916-1978), set in the countryside of Northern Shaanxi Province, depicts the ideological transformation of peasants and the class struggle during the agricultural cooperative movement. *Sunny Days* (2005) by Hao Ran (1932-2008), portraying the class struggle in the countryside, reflects the complexity of contradictions and conflicts, as well as the peasants' revolutionary enthusiasm in the early period of socialist construction. A third type is novels with industrial construction themes. The works with the themes gradually emerged alongside China's socialist construction in industry, reflecting the spirit of struggle among workers' class in socialist construction. Such as *A Thousand Miles of Lovely Land* (2021) by Yang Shuo (1913-1968), portraying the heroic deeds of the Chinese People's Volunteers in the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid North Korea, reflects the revolutionary heroism of the volunteers soldiers.

The third period, which began in 1978, is often referred to as the era of reform and opening up and continues to the present day. After the policy of reform and opening up was implemented, contemporary Chinese literature entered a stage of diversity, and the novel was no exception.

During the 1980s, literary schools such as Scar Literature, Introspection Literature, and Root-Seeking Literature emerged⁵. Writers from these schools began to rethink history and explore cultural roots. For instance, the representative works of Scar Literature include Lu Xinhua's (1954-) *Scar* and Liu Xinwu's (1942-) *The Class Teacher*, which both revealed appeals to human nature and reexaminations of history through their true-to-life and naïve narratives (Lu, 2015; Liu, 2013).

Entering the 1990s, literature paid more attention to individualized narration, and various genres, such as new realist novels, vanguard literature, feminist literature, and popular literature, thrived vigorously. The typical works of the new realist novels include *The Damned Grain* by Liu Heng (1954-) and *The Troubles of Life* by Chi Li (1957-), which emphasize representing the true situations in life and minimizing idealistic overtones (Liu, 1993; Chi, 1987). The novels of Root-Seeking Literature include *Turbulence* by Jia Pingwa (1952-) and *Red Sorghum* by Mo Yan (1955-), which highlight the pursuit of national cultural roots and the celebration of primitive life vigor (Jia, 1987; Mo, 1986). As for the works of vanguard literature, such as *To Live* by Yu Hua (1960-) and *Raise the Red Lantern* by Su Tong (1963-), stress new narrative techniques and the subversion of traditional forms (Yu, 1993; Su, 1989).

Throughout the new millennium, the literary themes and genres of contemporary Chinese novels have become richer and more diverse. Alongside the rapid changes of Chinese society, online literature has risen prominently. Online literature covers a wide range of genres, including fantasy, urban, historical, and science fiction, with a vast number of works. Notable examples include *Battle Through the Heavens* by Lee Hu (2009) and *Nirvana in Fire* by Hai Yan (2014). These works are characterized by their vivid plots and strong interactivity, catering to the diverse needs of readers (Lee, 2009; Hai, 2014).

With an understanding of the major periods and themes in modern and contemporary Chinese novels, we are now better positioned to apply Jameson's theory of third-world literature to specific works. These novels, through their diverse themes and forms, offer a rich tapestry of narratives that can be interpreted as "national allegories" reflecting broader social and historical contexts. In the following sections, we will examine several representative works of modern and contemporary Chinese literature through the lens of Jameson's theory, exploring how these works function as ideological critiques and national allegories within the context of China's unique social and cultural landscape.

Applying Third-World Literature Theory to Modern and Contemporary Chinese Novels

Jameson's third-world literature theory has far-reaching influence upon Chinese literature in writing and criticism. The sections given below are interpretations of modern and contemporary Chinese novels by using the third-world literature theory.

The True Story of Ah Q: National Allegory and the Political Unconscious of Revolutionary Failure

The novel *The True Story of Ah Q*, written by Lu Xun, is regarded as a classic of modern Chinese literature, published in 1921. The story, set against the backdrop of the Xinhai Revolution, exposes the dark sides of feudal

⁵ They are categories of contemporary Chinese novels in mainland China that are divided based on themes and materials. Scar Literature refers to Chinese literary works in the late 1970s and early 1980s that depicted the physical and psychological wounds inflicted by the Cultural Revolution. Introspection Literature emerged in the 1980s, focusing on deep reflection and critical examination of China's historical and social issues, often through personal experiences. Root-Seeking Literature, also from the 1980s, emphasized exploring China's cultural traditions and national identity, aiming to rediscover and affirm cultural roots in the face of modernization.

society, peasants' ignorance, and the incompleteness of the revolution through the tragic hero character of Ah Q. The novel reveals the predicament and struggle within the modernization process of Chinese society.

First, from the perspective of "national allegory", *The True Story of Ah Q* metaphorically reflects the predicament of the modernization process through the tragic fate of the hero, Ah Q. Ah Q, an oppressed and exploited peasant, employs the method of psychological victory, which serves not only as an individual self-consolation but also as a collective psychological attitude of Chinese society facing the challenges of modernization. By characterizing Ah Q's fate, the novel reveals that it is impossible for Chinese society to achieve modernization under the burden and oppression of feudal remnants, even after the Xinhai Revolution. This dual portrayal of both an individual and society makes the work a typical "national allegory".

Second, interpreting the novel from the perspectives of "political unconscious" and "ideological criticism", the work embodies Lu's deep rethinking about the Xinhai Revolution. Characterizing Ah Q's tragic fate, Lu Xun expresses his criticism of the unfinished Xinhai Revolution and the ignorance of the peasant class. Ah Q's misunderstanding about the revolution and his execution tell us the revolutionary complexity and the plight of the peasant class in the process of modernization. The reexamination by Lu Xun shows his ideological criticism, i.e., a negation of feudal remnants and the unfinished revolution. Through this analysis, the novel not only critiques the revolution but also reflects the broader social and ideological issues that hindered China's modernization.

White Deer Plain: Historical Allegory and Ideological Critique of Feudal Clan Culture

The novel *White Deer Plain* by Chen Zhongshi (1942-2016) reveals the social changes in the rural areas of Central Shaanxi province, spanning the period from the Late Qing Dynasty to the 1970s and 1980s. Set against the backdrop of the complicated grudges and favors between the Bai and Lu families, the novel describes the collapse of the feudal clan system, the transformation of social structures, and the complexity and struggles of human nature.

First, the work describes the great changes of Chinese society from feudal to modern by depicting the rise and fall of families living on the White Deer Plain. This portrayal serves as a metaphor for the broader transformation of Chinese society. The portrayal of feudal ethics, for example, Bai Jiaxuan's rigorous control over his clan and Lu San's tragic fate, exposes the suppression of human nature under feudalism as well as the conflicts and clashes within Chinese society during the process of modernization. Meanwhile, by depicting historical events such as peasants' revolution and land reform, the novel reflects the class struggle and social changes of the period, embodying a profound depth of history and society.

The novel also serves as an embodiment of ideological criticism. This criticism is primarily realized through a sharp critique of the feudal system. By depicting the rise and fall of families on the White Deer Plain, the novel exposes the hypocrisy and cruelty of the feudal clan system and condemns the way in which feudal ethics bind and control human nature.

At the same time, through the characterization of Bai Jiaxuan and other key figures, the novel not only reveals the plight and struggle of Chinese society during its modernization process but also offers an in-depth exploration of justice and equity in the context of social transformation. This dual critiques—against both the feudal system and the challenges of modernization—position the novel as a significant ideological critique. It functions as a powerful "national allegory" in the social sense, reflecting broader historical and cultural dynamics.

The Ordinary World: Modernization Allegory and National Consciousness of Ordinary Individuals

The Ordinary World (1986), written by Lu Yao (1949-1992), is a long novel that depicts the profound changes in rural and urban China during the early period of reform and opening up. Centered on the lives of two brothers, Sun Shaoan and Sun Shaoping, the novel explores their growth, progress, and struggles as ordinary individuals. It reflects not only the urban-rural divide, class clashes, and conflicts but also the individual fates and choices in the process of modernization. Through these characters, the novel offers a vivid portrayal of the challenges and transformations faced by ordinary people in a rapidly changing society. The work is a profound exploration of modernity and tradition. By portraying the fates of two brothers, Sun Shaoan and Sun Shaoping, it reflects Chinese thinking about tradition and modernization in the context of reform and opening up. Sun Shaoan, the elder brother, rooted in the rural community, struggles to change his family's fate by persevering in his agricultural endeavors. This character symbolizes the struggle and steadfastness of rural communities in the transition to modernity. In contrast, Sun Shaoping, the younger brother, leaves for the urban areas, experiencing both frustrations and growth. He represents individual exploration and the pursuit of modernity in the new era. The dual narrative of rural-to-urban transition and traditional-to-modern transformation mirrors the broader transformation of Chinese society and reflects the author's deep contemplation on the relationship between tradition and modernity. Additionally, the novel also plays a significant role in shaping national consciousness. Through the portrayal of the two brothers' fates in the Sun family, it represents the fighting spirit and future hope of ordinary individuals in the era of reform and opening-up. The work is not only a reflection of the difficulties and challenges in the transition to modernization but also a representation of the positive changes in Chinese society during the reform and opening-up. It highlights the inheritance of the national spirit. The portrayal and inheritance of the national spirit contribute significantly to shaping national consciousness.

Contrasted with the traditional interpretation of the novels given above, Jameson's interpretation focuses more on national allegory and ideological criticism, interpreting the works from a grand perspective. In contrast, the traditional interpretation emphasizes literariness, themes, and the author's intention, as well as social criticism and the standing of the works in Chinese literary history, from a micro-viewpoint. The traditional approach to interpreting novels often delves into the aesthetic qualities of the text, such as narrative techniques, character development, and linguistic features. It also pays close attention to the historical context in which the work was written, considering how the author's background and the social environment influence the themes and messages conveyed. This method aims to understand the work within its specific cultural and historical framework, highlighting its unique contributions to Chinese literary traditions. By doing so, it provides a detailed and nuanced understanding of the work's significance and its place in the broader literary canon.

Jameson's literary theory not only provides a new perspective to understand specific works and enrich literary interpretation but also offers a new framework for studying modern and contemporary Chinese novels. However, it also reminds us of the importance of balancing macro and micro approaches in literary analysis.

Through the application of F. Jameson's theory to several representative modern and contemporary Chinese novels, we have seen how these works can be interpreted as "national allegories" that reflect broader social and historical contexts. However, this application also reveals certain limitations of Jameson's theory when applied to the unique context of Chinese literature. While Jameson's framework offers valuable insights into the ideological dimensions of these works, it also raises important questions about the applicability of Western-centrist theories to non-Western literary traditions. In the following section, we will explore the critiques and

limitations of Jameson's theory as identified by Chinese scholars, highlighting the need for a more nuanced and culturally sensitive approach to literary analysis.

Critiques and Limitations of the Third-World Literary Theory

The Critiques Towards Jameson's Theory by Chinese Scholars

After Jameson's theory was introduced into Chinese academia, it has brought about widespread debate and discussion. The following aspects reflect Chinese scholars' ideas.

First, Jameson's theory, while emphasizing national allegory and ideological criticism in literature, tends to neglect literary diversity. His interpretation often oversimplifies the complexity of literature, overlooking the rich aesthetic values and diverse expressions that exist within different literary traditions. For instance, the vast diversity of Chinese novels across various historical eras and regions—ranging from the classical tales of the Tang and Song Dynasties to the contemporary works of the 21st century—cannot be fully captured within Jameson's theoretical framework. As Wang Yuechuan (2002) remarked, Jameson often takes Western theoretical frameworks and experiences as universal standards when discussing culture and ideology. This approach, however, overlooks the unique characteristics and complexities of non-Western cultures. To some extent, it perpetuates the Western colonial reading of non-Western cultures, simplifying third-world literature and culture as mere by-products of Western theories. This not only undermines the intrinsic value of non-Western literary traditions but also hinders a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of global literature. Although Zhang Xudong (also Chang Hseu-tung), as a disciple of Jameson, holds an affirmative attitude toward Jameson's theories, he points out that they are easily oversimplified in practice and application. Zhang and Dirlik (2000) stress that Jameson's theory is not just ideological criticism but a comprehensive analysis of history, culture, and art. He advises us to integrate the context of Chinese history and culture, rather than simply following Western theoretical frameworks, when interpreting Chinese literature (p. 399).

Second, Jameson's simplification of national characteristics has also been widely criticized. His concept of "national allegory" identifies third-world literature as a mere tool for national liberation and ideological struggle. However, this idea is seen as an overly simplified interpretation of the rich connotations of Chinese literature. Chinese literature is not only imbued with national characteristics but is also deeply influenced by traditional culture, social changes, and individual experiences. These factors, when combined, constitute the unique nationality characteristics, diversity, and complexity of Chinese literature. For example, the works of modern Chinese writers often reflect both the collective struggle for national identity and the personal search for meaning within a rapidly changing society. Jameson's theory, however, has not fully taken these multifaceted influences into account. Both Liu Fusheng (2020) and Chen Xuguang (2024) argue that Jameson's idea of national allegory oversimplifies third-world literature. Chinese scholars, they suggest, should adopt comprehensive approaches to study Chinese literature, incorporating historical, cultural, ideological, and contemporary perspectives. This is essential because Chinese literature itself is pluralistic and open-ended.

Third, Jameson's theory tends to overemphasize ideological criticism in interpreting literature. This approach often neglects the linguistic features and formal expressions within the work, leading to an excessively political interpretation. Such a tendency may result in the neglect of aesthetic values and artistic creativity. Liu Fusheng (2020) argues that literary criticism needs a delicate balance between ideological criticism and aesthetic analysis. He suggests that we should avoid simplifying treatments of literary works, for this may be resulted from relying solely on a single perspective. Instead, critics should engage with both the ideological and aesthetic

dimensions of a text to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding. This balanced approach is crucial for fully appreciating the complexity and richness of literary works (pp. 16-31).

Additionally, Jameson's theory is oriented towards Western-centrism. His theory of national allegory is regarded as underpinned by a kind of Western-centrist logic. The rough classification of third-world literature as national allegory is condemned as a mode of impact-response. That is, third-world literature is seen as a passive response to the impact from the Western world. Lydia H. Liu (2002) claims that Jameson's theory exhibits tendencies towards a first-world and third-world national binary, as well as a critical practice oriented toward the male. This division is criticized as overly simplistic, treating third-world literature as an externally imposed experience while neglecting its internal complexity and diversity (pp. 18-110).

Furthermore, there are criticisms about Jameson's totality. Both Chen Xuguang (2024) and Liu Fusheng (2020) have some reflections and rethinking about Jameson's totality. They argue that Jameson's idea is a kind of grand and systematic perspective, which can disclose the social and cultural significance hidden behind works. However, this method tends to easily fall into the trap of an overly grand analytical framework. Such a single stance often neglects the individuality, singularity, and artistry in works, and aesthetic values and formal innovations may be overlooked or oversimplified. Thus, they advocate that it is crucial for us to strike a balance between grand society and culture and micro-textual analysis.

Finally, Chinese scholars argue that Jameson's theory overlooks female narration. While female narration has gained increasing recognition worldwide, Jameson's approach often neglects its significance. As He Guimei (2005) has remarked, although traditional interpretations tend to render women invisible, Jameson, as a contemporary giant theorist, still fails to focus on female narration and the complex interplay between political affairs and society. She argues that a gender-blind reading is unable to fully grasp the internal logic and cultural meaning within literature (pp. 100-113).

The Limitations of the Theory in Chinese Context

Though Jameson's theory provides a new approach to interpreting modern and contemporary novels, it has limitations in the studies of fiction. These limitations are embodied as follows.

First, Jameson's theory is unable to fully encompass the complexity and uniqueness of Chinese literature. Chinese literature has undergone transformations from tradition to modernity, and is influenced by Western culture, Marxism, and its own native cultural traditions. Understandably, a single theoretical framework like Jameson's cannot fully account for the diversity and complexity of Chinese literature. For instance, some contemporary novels not only reflect social reality but also explore human nature, cultural tradition, and individual experience. However, Jameson tends to focus more on ideological criticism and overlooks the diversity and complexity within these novels.

Second, Jameson's theory fails to cover the cultural uniqueness in interpreting Chinese literature. Chinese literature is deeply influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and other traditional cultural traditions, which have had a lasting influence on its development. For example, Confucianism emphasizes social harmony, hierarchical respect, and moral integrity, values that permeate Chinese literature through the use of honorifics, politeness markers, and themes of social responsibility. Taoism, on the other hand, advocates living in harmony with nature and simplicity, often reflected in the use of concise, paradoxical language and the pursuit of natural aesthetics in poetry and prose. These cultural nuances are integral to Chinese literature and shape its themes, language, and aesthetics. However, Jameson's theory tends to adopt a Western-Marxist orientation, which primarily focuses on

historical materialism and the socioeconomic contexts of literature. While this approach is valuable for analyzing Western literature, it may not fully account for the unique cultural and philosophical underpinnings of Chinese literature. For instance, the Taoist concept of “Wu Wei” (non-action) or the Confucian emphasis on “face” and social harmony are deeply embedded in Chinese literary works but are not easily captured by a Marxist framework. Therefore, Jameson’s theory, though insightful in its own right, is insufficient to fully interpret the rich cultural tapestry of Chinese literature.

Last, interpreting Chinese literature requires more subtle and dynamic approaches. Jameson’s emphasis on ideological criticism and historical analysis, while valuable, is insufficient to address the diverse needs of Chinese literature. His methods may overlook the intricate cultural nuances and multifaceted contexts that shape Chinese literary works. Therefore, Chinese scholars advocate for an integration of multiple methods to study Chinese literature, such as literariness analysis, cultural studies, and sociological studies. This interdisciplinary approaches can better capture the complexity and diversity of Chinese literature, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding and interpretation.

The critiques and limitations of Jameson’s theory identified by Chinese scholars highlight significant challenges in applying Western-centrist theoretical frameworks to the study of Chinese literature. These critiques are not unique to Jameson’s work but reflect broader issues in cross-cultural literary studies. To better understand why these critiques and limitations arise, it is essential to examine the underlying reasons behind them. In the following section, we will explore the major reasons for these critiques and limitations, including the impact of Western-centrist perspectives, the neglect of cultural differences, and the challenges of translation and adaptation in cross-cultural contexts.”

Reasons for the Limitations of the Theory in China

Why are there so-called limitations given above regarding Jameson’s theory in China? In fact, these limitations are not unique to his work, nor are they a kind of purposeful attacks. Instead, they are understandable and normal phenomena that occur when any new theory is introduced into a foreign or different culture, or in cross-cultural communication. Such phenomena are indeed inevitable, as cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the reasons behind these critiques and limitations to better address them in future cross-cultural exchanges and dissemination of new theories, culture, and art in China. The following aspects are the major reasons behind the critiques and limitations.

First, Jameson’s Western-centrism perspective. Jameson’s theory is oriented toward Western-centrism. Given China’s unique historical, social, and cultural contexts, such theories may not be directly applicable and must be tested and localized to fit the complexity and uniqueness of the Chinese environment. For example, theories deeply rooted in Western cultural paradigms may fail to address specific problems in the Chinese context. Only by adapting these theories to fit local realities can we ensure their relevance and applicability. This process of localization is crucial for the successful integration of any foreign theory into a new cultural environment, and Jameson’s theory is no exception.

Second, limitations in cross-cultural applicability. Despite significant gaps in history, society, and aesthetics among different cultures, Jameson’s theory fails to fully account for these differences in cross-cultural communication. For instance, his theory of “national allegory” simplistically treats third-world literature as a tool for national liberation and ideological struggle, thereby overlooking the richness and diversity in artistic forms, aesthetic values, and cultural contexts.

In cross-cultural communication, it is crucial to acknowledge and address these differences to avoid oversimplification and misinterpretation. Jameson's approach, however, tends to apply a generalized framework that may not well adequately capture the nuances of non-Western cultures. This limitation is particularly evident when his theory is applied to contexts outside its original scope, such as in China, where historical, social, and cultural complexities require a more nuanced understanding.

Third, simplifying cultural diversity. Jameson often adopts a perspective of grand "totality", emphasizing the influence of social and cultural settings on literary works. However, this approach tends to overlook the individuality and artistry of the works themselves. Such simplification may lead to neglecting the aesthetic values and formal innovations within these works. By focusing too much on the overarching social context, Jameson's theory risks reducing the complexity of literary works to mere reflections of broader cultural forces, rather than recognizing their unique artistic contributions or the ontology of literary works.

Next, lacking adaptability and flexibility. This refers to the fact that Jameson's theory lacks adequate adaptability and flexibility in intercultural applications to address specific issues in different cultural contexts. For instance, Jameson's theory often fails to fully account for traditional culture, social changes, and individual experiences related to works. As a result, the adaptability of his theory is confined to a certain extent. Chinese writers are influenced by Chinese tradition and culture, especially Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. These philosophical and cultural traditions shape the way Chinese literature is created and understood. Therefore, integrating various factors can enhance the adaptability and flexibility of the new theory in China.

Besides, Jameson is inclined to highlight political ideology. His theory tends to overemphasize the interpretation of the ideological content in literary works, thereby neglecting their aesthetic and formal qualities. This bias may lead to the simplification of literary works into mere the ideological tools, overshadowing their independent value as art.

Last, the limitations of language and translation. Given that translation and interpretation are indispensable in cross-cultural communication, linguistic differences among nations and cultures can result in misunderstanding or misinterpretation. Translating and applying Jameson's theory in different linguistic and cultural contexts, such as in the Chinese context, may fail to accurately convey his original intention and lead to theoretical "displacement". This displacement occurs when the nuances of the original theory are lost or altered during translation, causing the theory in other culture to deviate from its intended meaning.

Understanding why Jameson's theory is criticized and limited in China offers valuable insights into the complexities of cross-cultural literary studies. These critiques highlight the need for a more nuanced, culturally sensitive, and interdisciplinary approach to analyzing modern and contemporary Chinese novels. As we move forward, it is crucial to integrate these insights into our future research and theoretical frameworks. In the concluding section, we will summarize the key findings of this study and discuss the implications for the future of Chinese literary studies in the global context.

Conclusion

As we navigate the complexities of the Chinese novels through the lens of Jameson's theory of third-world literature, it becomes evident that this framework, while illuminating certain dimensions of these works, also reveals its limitations in fully capturing the richness and diversity of Chinese literary expressions. The critiques and challenges posed by Chinese scholars highlight the need for a more nuanced and culturally sensitive approach to literary analysis. This necessity is not merely academic but reflective of a broader imperative to engage with

the multifaceted realities of Chinese literature, here, i.e. modern and contemporary Chinese novels, within its unique historical, cultural, and social contexts.

In the era of globalization, the study of modern and contemporary Chinese novels must transcend the confines of Western-centrist-oriented theoretical paradigms. While Jameson's theory provides a valuable entry point for understanding the ideological and historical underpinnings of these works, it is essential to recognize that Chinese literature is deeply intertwined with its own cultural traditions, social transformations, and individual experiences. The future of Chinese literary studies lies in the development of an interdisciplinary approach that integrates literary criticism, cultural studies, and sociological analysis. Such an approach would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities inherent in Chinese novels, acknowledging both their national allegorical dimensions and their unique aesthetic and cultural characteristics.

Moreover, the rise of new literary forms, such as online literature, further complicates the application of traditional theoretical frameworks. These emerging genres challenge existing notions of literary value and form, necessitating a reevaluation of what constitutes "literature" in contemporary context. As Chinese society continues to evolve at a rapid rate, its literature will undoubtedly reflect these changes, offering new insights into the human condition, cultural identity, and global inter-connectedness. Scholars must remain vigilant in their efforts to adapt and innovate their methodologies to keep pace with these developments.

Ultimately, the study of modern and contemporary Chinese novels is not only about understanding the past but also about anticipating the future. By engaging with these works through a more inclusive and dynamic lens, we can better appreciate their contributions to the global literary landscape. This appreciation is not merely a matter of acknowledging their existence but of recognizing their potential to reshape our understanding of literature as a whole. As Chinese literature continues to assert its presence on the world stage, it is imperative that we approach it with a spirit of curiosity, respect, and openness, embracing the diversity and complexity that define its essence. In doing so, we may find that the future of literary studies lies not in the preservation of established paradigms but in the creation of new ones that reflect the evolving realities of our interconnected world.

References

- Ba, J. (2018). *Family*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Bing, X. (2021). *To young readers*. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Chen, X. G. (2024). Prof. Fredric Jameson's legacy of cultural criticism. *China Book Review*, 24, 8-20.
- Chen, Z. S. (1993). *White deer plain*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Chi, L. (1987). *The troubles of life*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Feng, D. Y. (2021). *Bitter herbs*. Beijing: Beijing United Publishing Company.
- Hai, Y. (2014). Nirvana in fire. Retrieved from https://nirvanainfire.miraheze.org/wiki/Main_Page/
- Hao, R. (2005). *Sunny days*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- He, G. M. (2005). *The literary imagination of human studies: Contemporary Chinese thought, culture, and literary issues*. Zhengzhou: Henan UP.
- Jameson, F. (1986). Third-world literature in the era of multinational capitalism. *Social Text*, 15, 65-88.
- Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. (Q. Q. Chen, Trans.). Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company.
- Jameson, F. (2000). *Cultural turn*. (Y. M. Hu, Trans.). Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.
- Jameson, F. (2008). *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the persistence of the dialectic*. (Y. H. Lee, Trans.). Nanjing: Nanjing UP.
- Jameson, F. (2024). *The geopolitical aesthetic: Cinema and space in the world system*. (W. Zhang, Trans.). Hangzhou: Zhejiang UP.

- Jencks, C. (1986). *The language of post-modern architecture*. (D. X. Li, Trans.). Beijing: China Architecture & Building Press.
- Jencks, C. (1996). *What is post-modernism*. USA: Academy Press.
- Jia, P. W. (1987). *Turbulence*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Lee, H. (2009). *Battle through the heavens*. Retrieved from <https://m.webnovel.com/>
- Liang, B. (2019). *Red flag flying*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Liu, F. S. (2020). A critic's task—An interview with Prof. Liu Fusheng. *Commentaries on Literature and Art*, 2, 16-31.
- Liu, H. (1993). *The damned grain*. Beijing: The Writers Publishing House.
- Liu, L. H. (2002). *Translingual practice: Literature, national culture, and translated modernity in China, 1900-1937*. (W. J. Song, Trans.). Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company.
- Liu, Q. (2005). *The builders of a new life*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Liu, X. W. (2013). *The class teacher*. Nanjing: Yilin Press.
- Lu, X. (2015). *The true story of Ah Q*. Guangzhou: Flower City Publishing House.
- Lu, X. (2022). *The diary of a mad man*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Lu, X. H. (2015). *Scar*. Beijing: Beijing United Publishing Company.
- Lu, Y. (1986). *The ordinary world*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Mao, D. (2020). *Midnight*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Mo, Y. (1986). *Red sorghum*. Beijing: People's Liberation Army Literature and Art Publishing House.
- Su, T. (1989). *Raise the red lantern*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Wang, P. Z. (Ed.). (2004). *Anthology of Fredric Jameson's works*. Beijing: China Renmin UP.
- Wang, Y. C. (1992). *Cultural study of postmodernism*. Beijing: Peking UP.
- Wang, Y. C. (1994). *Culture and aesthetics of postmodernism*. Beijing: Peking UP.
- Wang, Y. C. (2002). *Postmodern and postcolonialism in China* (pp. 218-258). Beijing: Capital Normal UP.
- Wang, Z. H. (1998). *The elusive game: A study of postmodern philosophical trends*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.
- Yang, S. (2021). *A thousand miles of lovely land*. Beijing: Beijing United Publishing Company.
- Yu, H. (1993). *To live*. Beijing: The Writers Publishing House.
- Zeng, J. (2020). The reception of western postmodernism in China: A forty-year journey and its issues. *Chinese Journal of Literary Criticism*, 6(3), 99-110.
- Zhang, X. D. (Ed.). (1997a). *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company.
- Zhang X. D. (Ed.). (1997b). *The cultural logic of late capitalism: Selected papers of Fredric Jameson's criticism*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company.
- Zhang, X. D. (2021). *Cultural Identity in the Age of Globalization: A Historical Reflection on Western Universalist Discourse*. Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Press/Guangqi Books.
- Zhang, X. D., & Dirlík, A. (Eds.). (2000). *Postmodernism and China*. Durham: Duke UP.
- Zhao, S. L. (2021). *The marriage of Little Hei II*. Guangzhou: Flower City Publishing House.