

Jiang Chengyong and 19th-Century Western Literature Studies

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Abstract: Jiang Chengyong is one of the most distinguished Chinese scholars of 19th-century western literature, whose works have guided our research in many directions and opened up new avenues for explorations. This paper attempts to survey Jiang's scholarship of 19th-century western literature and to highlight his achievements in this field from three aspects. First, it interrogates Jiang's efforts invested in 19th-century Western literary trends, with reference to his ambitious pursuit of constructing a critical discourse for foreign literature studies. Second, it attempts to reveal Jiang's methodological innovations in his works on 19th-century western literature, especially in regards to his significant proposal for an interdisciplinary approach to foreign literature in "Internet-globalization" era. Third, it traces Jiang's exploration of the dialectical relationship between literature and science which is typically embodied in 19th-century western writers' "resistance" to and "acceptance" of science.

Keywords: Jiang Chengyong; 19th-century western literature; literary trends; methodological innovations; literature and science

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标题: 蒋承勇与 19 世纪西方文学研究

内容摘要: 蒋承勇是 19 世纪西方文学研究领域最为杰出的中国学者之一，其研究成果开辟了外国文学研究的新路径，引领了外国文学研究朝着多个方向发展。本文试图从三个方面考察蒋承勇的 19 世纪外国文学研究，展呈其在这一领域的重要贡献。第一、蒋承勇深耕 19 世纪西方文学潮流，并致力于建构外国文学研究批评话语。第二、蒋承勇在其关于 19 世纪西方文学的系列论著中，注重方法论创新，特别是在当今“网络-全球化”时代，提出了外国文学跨学科研

究的具体路径与建议。第三、蒋承勇辨析了文学与科学之间的辩证关系，深刻揭示19世纪西方作家对科学抱持的“抗拒”和“接纳”的矛盾态度。

关键词：蒋承勇；19世纪西方文学；文学思潮；方法创新；文学与科学

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Jiang Chengyong is a name that rings much familiarity to most Chinese scholars. Jiang's scholarly interests entail a wide range of fields. To name a few, modernism, world literature and comparative literature, history of the novel, realist literature, etc. Among all these fields, it is 19th-century western literature that attracts him most, which is evidenced in a number of works by him, such as *A Modern Interpretation of Realism in the 19th-Century* (1996), *A Modern Interpretation of Naturalism in European and American Literature* (2002), and *The Nineteenth-Century Western Literary Trends Studies* (2022). This paper attempts to survey Jiang's scholarship of 19th-century western literature and to highlight his achievements in this field from three aspects. First, it interrogates Jiang's efforts invested in 19th-century Western literary trends, with reference to his ambitious pursuit of constructing a critical discourse for foreign literature studies. Second, it attempts to reveal Jiang's methodological innovations in his works on 19th-century western literature, especially in regards to his significant proposal for an interdisciplinary approach to foreign literature in "Internet-globalization" era. Third, it traces Jiang's exploration of the dialectical relationship between literature and science which is typically embodied in 19th-century western writers' "resistance" to and "acceptance" of science.

Literary Trends and Contemporary Values of 19th-century Western Literature

In the west, the development of modern literature since romanticism has been framed as the dynamics of the emerging literary movement reacting against its predecessors. Nonetheless, subscribing to the storytelling of literary revolution would regrettably result in an interpretation of literary history teemed with inaccessible gaps. In "A Pact," Ezra Pound eloquently writes, "I make truce with you, Walt Whitman—/ I have detested you long enough. / I come to you as a grown child/ Who has had a pig-headed father" (Pound 27), indicating a complex yet intrinsic kinship between traditional art and the avant-garde. In fact, even writers

who claim to be anti-traditional are endowed with the heritage from the past as long as they are self-identified within a certain cultural context. In the similar vein, the progression of literary periods is enabled by both the betrayal and the inheritance of its own tradition, the issue of which is related to the rewriting of literary history.

In contrast, the Chinese academia has seen a long-existing mind-set inclined to an over-simplified version of history. The emphasis has been misplaced merely on conflicts between schools and trends, while the internal complementarity, integration and continuity has to a large extent be ignored. Despite the constant changes of critical climates, the issue of “rewriting literary history” remains a hot topic in China. Regrettably, most works on literary history by Chinese scholars are devoted to introducing writers’ lives and works, lacking a substantial connection with literary movements and trends. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify these confusions and get things on the right track. Against this backdrop, Jiang’s systematic work on the literary trends in the 19th-century is both timely and significant. In Jiang’s view, “literary trends are a central thread in the development of modern Western literature that began in the 19th-century. A systematic study and comprehensive elucidation of various literary trends in the 19th-century western literature not only help to achieve an accurate understanding of 19th-century western literature, but also have significant benefits for deepening the understanding of western modernism and post-modernism in the 20th-century” (Jiang, *The Nineteenth-Century Western Literary Trends Studies* 1). Viewed in this light, the literary trends serve as an important link between 19th-century western literature and the movements of modernism and postmodernism flourishing in the 20th-century western literature.

What is a literary trend? Why studying western literary trends in the 19th-century in particular? These are the central questions in Jiang’s works. About the definition of literary trend, Jiang argues that:

The so-called “literary trend” refers to a literary movement with a certain shared ideological tendency, artistic pursuit and wide impact under the influence of social and cultural trends in a specific historical period. Generally speaking, a literary trend can be observed and defined from four aspects: First, it often condenses into a specific social and cultural trend of philosophical worldview (the core of which is about the concept of humans), which is the deep cultural logic of the emergence and development of this literary trend (literature is the study of man). Second, it refers to a complete and unique poetic system, which is the theoretical expression of this literary trend. Third, it refers to the emergence of a large number of literary schools and literary

societies, which often promote the development of literature in the form of literary “movements” and represent the phenomenon of the ecological system of writers. Fourth, it refers to new textual experiments and technical innovations, which are the ultimate results of this literary trend for contributing to the development of literary creation. (Jiang, *The Nineteenth-Century Western Literary Trends Studies* 1-2)

In the quoted lines above, we can clearly see that Jiang intends to connect literary movements with history, philosophy, poetic system, literary schools and literary experiments. In doing so, one is enabled to explore literary trends in depth.

About the question why western literary trend in the 19th-century in particular, Jiang claims that both the advancement of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th-century and the expansion of the market stimulate the globalization of western capitalist spiritual products and material products. The revolutionary improvement of modern transportation and media technology has increasingly turned the world into an interconnected village, where collisions and blends between various cultural traditions struggle with geographical and power constraints. A brief review of 19th-century western literary history reveals that after the emergence of western modern ideological trends such as Romanticism and Realism, they quickly spread to multiple countries, ethnic groups, and regions. The literary circle in China has also been influenced by these literary trends. For instance, during the New Culture Movement, the Chinese literary circle, with its doors open to the West, was full of the cacophony of voiced from Romanticism, Realism, and other western literary trends.

Jiang’s scholarship of 19th-century western literature is most saliently represented in his six-volume work *The Nineteenth-Century Western Literary Trends Studies* (2022), which is devoted to examining such as literary trends as *Romanticism*, *Realism*, *Naturalism*, *Aestheticism*, *Symbolism* and *Decadentism*. In the following paragraphs, I will illuminate Jiang’s contribution to the scholarship of 19th-century literature by referring to his works on these six literary trends.

The concerns with romanticism and its definition are not entirely new. However, it remains a tricky issue to describe and define romanticism with accuracy and comprehensiveness. Jiang tactfully formulates the topic by taking the core conception “freedom” as its epistemological foundation, which made romanticism a landmark movement in modern literary history. He interprets romanticism as a literary movement identified by its central watchword of freedom. In his view, as a revolt against the Neoclassicism and a reflection on the Enlightenment, romanticism emphasizes on individuality and individual solitude, political liberty,

social righteousness, cultural pluralism, artistic freedom and so forth. Additionally, he offers a historically accurate account by considering the development of romanticism in contexts of industrial revolution, the French Revolution, as well as the western literature and culture at the end of 19th-century. In the western world, the spirit of freedom has been a most cherished value with both societal and cultural significance. Thus, an in-depth discussion of freedom not only contributes to improving and reconstructing the theoretical framework of romanticism studies, but also benefits a deeper understanding of the whole western literary and intellectual history, especially concerning with the distinctive ideological strategies in the East and the West.

Realism is one major literary phenomenon in the history of world literature. In fact, realism claims significance and influence not only in a literary sense, but also as a political, philosophical and practical issue. Jiang traces realism back to the social and historical background, with an insight into its aesthetics and rich connotation. Different from most of the previous studies that present a generalized description, Jiang delves into the manifold expressions concealed by the umbrella term “realism.” Jiang approaches the topic by unveiling the several faces of realism, including modernity, rationalism, empiricism, the pursuit of truth, modernism and western literary tradition, rational writing and aesthetic appeal. From an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspective, he explores inherent features and diverse variants of realism in countries outside Europe and America, and offers a parallel comparison of Chinese and foreign literary history, which is of great academic value to world literature.

Though decades of years have passed since its heyday, heated debates over the evaluation and definition of naturalism have been continued till now. In *The Blackwell Companion to Naturalism*, Kelly James Clark points out the confusion and difficulty in defining naturalism, “one that captures every-thing that goes by the name. Defined too narrowly, it leaves out wide swaths of human thought and experience; defined too broadly, it includes many things that naturalists hope to exclude. A better approach, then, is to consider various understandings of naturalism, as well as naturalism’s historical development and recent rise” (Clark 1-2). Jiang deals with the persistent question of “what exactly is naturalism” by referring to such aspects as the textual construction, artistic methodology, poetic view and cultural ideology. Meanwhile, with efforts to filling in the enduring chasm in the present literary history writing, he interrogates and reveals the dynamic and intrinsic connection between naturalism and realism. As a literary trend, naturalism has a wide and profound impact on two generations of writers, and the radically

anti-traditional revolution in poetics and writing techniques has directly influenced the emergence and development of modernism. Due to its cold, penetrating and authentic writing, naturalism gains irreplaceable significance in literary representation of the transforming society. In this sense, by clarifying the essence and meanings of naturalism, Jiang's work achieves epistemological breakthrough and gains a major role in re-writing western literary history.

Jiang begins with perusal of aestheticism by illustrating how it is introduced and received in China. Facing challenges from Chinese long-honored pragmatic culture notwithstanding, aestheticism, along with other western literary trends, has deeply intervened in the modern history of ideas in China and undoubtedly plays a role in Chinese literary apparatus. In this sense, it is of benefits to examine the motives and ideology of aestheticism so as to lay open a more comprehensive vision of both western literature and Chinese cultural and literary history. In aspects of philosophy, aesthetics, art history, social life, and cultural exchanges between East and West, Jiang's work sheds much light on the occurrence of aestheticism with a genealogical view of its development in major European and American countries in the 19th-century, as well as its variants in the East. Jiang interrogates the slogan "art for art's sake" with its supporting ideas including "art is larger than life" and "art saves life," arguing that the core principle of aestheticism has a concrete basis on the history of philosophy and aesthetics. As a cultural product of a particular period and intellectual source of modernist literature, aestheticism plays an important role in the evaluation and interpretation of world literature. In this regard, Jiang's work is valuable and suggestive in refreshing the recognition of aesthetics and unleash the vitality of literature.

With a profound intertwisting with painting, music and religion, symbolism has been exceedingly difficult to pin down. In *What is Symbolism?* Henri Peyre indicates that "In fact, labels of 'Wagnerianism' were too quickly brandished with regard to the fortuitous repetitions of 'motifs' or themes in novelistic works, and certain of Debussy's pieces were too easily confused with French or even foreign literary works (D. G. Rossetti, G. D'Annunzio) that had served them as points of departure" (Peyre 117). In China, however, such an interrelation between symbolism and other artistic fields has been largely neglected. Jiang offers readers a synthetic historical view of symbolism by considering it in the contexts of prevailing cultural and artistic phenomenon in the 19th century. Notably, he relates the emergence of symbolism with drugs and mysticism, which originally offers a diachronic view to symbolism studies. Furthermore, he attributes the fashion of free verse to anarchism in aesthetics, which has encouraged symbolists such as T. de Wyzewa and Gustave

Kahn to take a radical aesthetic attitude.

Compared with other literary movements, studies on decadentism remain relatively insufficient and marginalized, especially in China. Nonetheless, decadentism is undoubtedly a key topic to account for the gloomy undercurrent of discontent before the onset of the 20th-century and people's spiritual malaise in a rapid-developing industrial society. Therefore, how to deal with the intrinsic vagueness in the term itself and liberate it from the rigid moral criticism is an important part in both the West and the East academic agenda. In this context, Jiang's work is rather impressive as it offers a systematic review of the short-lived decadentism in the late 19th-century that came closest to modernism. By a close examination of various meanings that the term "decandence" might refer to, he reconstructs the world in different spectrums of society and history, philosophy and literature, revealing the rich essence decadence possesses other than a biased understanding which relates to corruption, indulgent sensibility and moral decay. Jiang explores decadentism as a literary style in considering its poetics, literary representation, prominent writers and typical characters in fictions. Furthermore, he examines enduring motifs of decadent literature, such as sexual inversion and erotic obsession, the metaphor of illness and enchantment with death. Notably, Jiang locates decadentism in the frame of axes of literary history in the 19th-century and considers its kinship with romanticism, naturalism, symbolism, aestheticism and modernism. In doing so, he opens up new avenues for exploring decadentism and the interplay of society, people's psyche and literature in 19th-century.

It needs to be pointed out that Jiang always does his study of 19th-century western literature with Chinese consciousness. Adopting a cross-cultural perspective, he takes the fate of romanticism, realism, and naturalism in China as an example to illuminate imbalance of travelling literary trends. He claims that "Why did romanticism, realism, naturalism and other western literary trends enter China at the beginning of the 20th-century, but some took root and blossomed while others disappeared or faded away? The answer lies in the selective acceptance in cultural exchanges that has caused this uneven dissemination" (Jiang, "On the Depth of Communication in Humanities" 609-610). As a matter of fact, in the process of doing studies of 19th-century western literature, Jiang takes an opportunity to construct a critical discourse for foreign literature studies.

Methodological Innovation and the Studies of 19th-century Western Literature

In his studies of 19th-century western literature, Jiang lays a particular stress on methodological innovations. In Jiang's view, "in the era of 'networking and

globalization', multi-cultural communication and collision are accelerated and intensified, requiring foreign literature studies to stand in the height of 'general literature' and to scrutinize from an overall perspective the literatures of different times and of diverse cultural backgrounds in the spirit of the commensurability of human literature, which means the 'integration' of ideas and the interactive use of multiple research methods in the process of comparative research" (Jiang, "Stepping Towards Integration and Accommodation" 103). In his work on 19th-century western literature, Jiang proposes that the study of literary trends needs to be done at cross-language, cross-nation, cross-ethnic and cross-cultural levels. In a nutshell, Jiang spares no pains in calling for an interdisciplinary approach to 19th-century western literature, integrating philosophy, aesthetics, theology, anthropology, sociology, political science and narratology. In doing so, Jiang succeeds in examining the correlation of literary trends not only vertically (such as the correlation between romanticism and naturalism, romanticism and symbolism) but also horizontally (such as romanticism and aestheticism, romanticism and decadentism, and the relationship among naturalism, symbolism, aestheticism and decadentism).

In his article "Interdisciplinary Interaction and Innovation in the Methodology of Literary Studies," Jiang argues that

In addition to "literariness" in the aesthetic sense, the essential property of literary research also includes the inclusiveness and integration of knowledge from different disciplines, as literature has an inherent omnipresence of human activity and knowledge. The study of literature should adhere to "literariness" in the aesthetic sense, but it should neither be servile to aesthetic conventions to disregard the "interdisciplinarity" between literature and other disciplines, nor reject multidisciplinary interaction and communication. Even in the context of the modern academic system, in which the division of disciplines has been more and more meticulous and consummate, literary studies should still adhere to the multidisciplinary synthesis of knowledge production and the rich diversity of research methods, while maintaining its inherent literariness and aesthetics. Not only is literary research always inseparable from interdisciplinary interaction and communication based on interdisciplinarity, but upgrading, expanding, and deepening the interdisciplinary and even "supra-disciplinary" research is indeed an important way to innovate the concept and methodology of our study on Chinese and foreign literature in this "Internet-globalization" era. (Jiang, "Interdisciplinary Interaction and Innovation in the Methodology of Literary Studies" 61)

That said, in Jiang's view, the interdisciplinary approach is an unavoidable tendency in literature studies in current "Internet-globalization" era. Jiang's argument is particularly illuminating and suggestive in the context that Chinese academia is now devoted to establishing its own academic system, discipline system, and discourse system. It is much needed and urgent that critics should break up the barriers of disciplines and majors, and pursue methodological innovations through interdisciplinary interaction.

Jiang adopts the interdisciplinary approach in his book *Classical Assessment and Innovation of Western Literature Research Methods* (2020), in which he mainly examines the classical nineteen-century writers and their works, 19th-century literary trends, and theoretical theories and aims for a model for research innovations. Especially illuminating is Jiang's comparison and exploration of the discipline of comparative literature and intercultural studies and the discipline of comparative literature and world literature. For a long time, the discipline of comparative literature and world literature is included in the general discipline of Chinese language and literature, while the discipline of comparative literature and intercultural studies is set up within the general discipline of foreign languages and literatures. At issue is question of whether the two disciplines are the same? If not, what are the differences between them? In Jiang's view, given the general context of Chinese literature and language, world literature designates all those national literatures other than Chinese literature, and aims to formulate a comparison and contrast between those foreign literatures and Chinese literature. That said, the discipline of comparative literature and world literature attempts to highlight the worldly elements of Chinese literature. Unlike the discipline of comparative literature and world literature, the discipline of comparative literature and intercultural studies places much emphasis on the comparative method and critics' multilingual ability. The purpose of making a comparison between the two similar disciplines, according to Jiang, is to go towards general literature studies so as to shed a new light on classical literature. Therefore, Jiang reinterprets the classical 19th-century western literary works by Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, D. H. Lawrence, and others. I think Jiang's work of this kind and his timely proposal opens up new avenues for explore literature in "internet-globalization" era.

"Two Cultures" Revisited:

The Interplay between Sciences and 19th-century Western Literature

In his 1959 Rede Lecture, C. P. Snow claimed that the intellectual life of the whole

of Western society is split into two polar groups:

Literary intellectuals at one pole—at the other scientists, and as the most representative, the physical scientists. Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension—sometimes (particularly among the young) hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding. They have a curious distorted image of each other. Their attitudes are so different that, even on the level of emotion, they can't find much common ground. (Snow 4)

Snow is rather keen in his observation of the split two-culture phenomenon, which has been heatedly discussed in the last several decades. As Steven Meyer points out, “Over the past four decades, and in going dialogue with science studies, the innovative interdisciplinary field of literature and science has become a dynamic platform for investigation into the many ways that the humanities and sciences share (1) a fundamentally pluralistic outlooks; (2) common cultures, discourses, and practices; and (3) a commitment to expanding the range and capabilities of empiricist approaches” (Meyer 1). The issue of sciences in literature is now a hot topic in today's international academia. One can easily think of such works as Steven Meyer's *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Science* (2018), Neel Ahuja et al.'s *The Palgrave Handbook of Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature and Science* (2020), Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini's *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Science* (2011) and Jay A. Labinger's *Connecting Literature and Science* (2022).

As generally acknowledged, it is T. H. Huxley who has made the first explicit investigation of the relationship between literature and science. In 1880, Huxley presented a talk entitled “Science and Culture” to mark the launching of the new institute, Josiah Mason's Science College in Birmingham. However, according to Hubert Zapf, “The relationship between science and literature, between conceptual-empirical knowledge and imaginative story-telling, has been a theme and testing-ground of literary and cultural theory from the very beginnings of critical thought. Ever since Plato discarded any claims of ascribing reliable truth or knowledge to fictional texts, literature has had to struggle for recognition as a field of intellectually serious and respectable cultural practice” (Zapf 1).

In recent years, Jiang has been devoted to exploring the connections and interplay between literature and science in the 19th-century, as he assumes that “Western natural science in the 19th-century scores tremendous achievements,

changes the spiritual and cultural climate of this era and ushers in evolutionary reforms in literature” (Jiang, “‘The Century of Science’ and the Characteristics of Literature: On the Relationship between Science and Truth-Seeking of Realism” 83). How did sciences influence the literary creations in the 19th-century? How did 19th-century writers respond to the rapid developments of sciences at that time? To address these two interrelated questions, Jiang takes pains investigating sciences and 19th-century literary trends. Let us take his works on the correlation between sciences and realism, and sciences and romanticism as examples.

In his article “‘The Century of Science’ and the Characteristics of Literature: On the Relationship between Science and Truth-Seeking of Realism,” Jiang argues that “The penetration of scientific spirit and scientific reason gives birth to the realistic literary trend of ideology with ‘avant-garde’ feature” (Jiang, “‘The Century of Science’ and the Characteristics of Literature” 83), in Jiang’s view, the new achievements of natural sciences in the 19th-century enabled Europeans to understand the world through scientific and rational worldviews and methodologies, and to deal with the relationship between people and their surrounding world. The developments of sciences more or less challenged the long-standing “metaphysical” speculative method. It is precisely this spiritual and cultural climate different from any previous century that has influenced the development of Western literature. Jiang makes an insightful observation that realistic literature is highlighted by its truth-seeking characteristic and contributes to the modernistic transformation of western literature. In this regard, “although the scientific Truth-seeking characteristic of realism demonstrates its historical rationality and contemporary value, it also exposes historical limitations and imperfections, which is also one of the reasons why the movement of modernism denounces and rebels against it” (83).

In examining the issue of sciences in Romanticism, Jiang claims that romanticism emerged as a rebellion against modern civilization in the 19th-century and returned to literary “revolution” based on arts. The main goal of romanticism is to free literature from the shackles of scientific rationality, social and political rationality, and utilitarianism. In this light, romanticism is inherently resistant to science and rationality. However, romanticists cultivate a strong interest in sciences and draw knowledge, methods, and ideas from sciences for both artistic inspirations and narrative techniques. In this sense, one can safely argue that science has promoted the occurrence and development of romanticism, and romanticists have an inseparable spiritual connection with science. That said, romanticism counteracted the worship of science and rationality chanted by the Enlightenment and promoted the perceptual essence of human beings. Jiang forcefully argues that romanticism is

obsessed with sensibility, but it does not completely exclude rationality, and thus it cannot be labelled as “anti-science.”

In his exploration of the relationship between literature and science, Jiang holds a dialectical view by using the words “resistance” and “acceptance” to describe the contradictions and dialectical relationship between them. Noteworthy is Jiang’s argument about their correlation with regards to Chinese discourse system for literary studies. He argues that:

On the one hand, there is a “difference” of mutual exclusion and resistance between natural science and literature and art, on the other hand, there is a “connection” of mutual acceptance and complementarity. Resistance and acceptance, exclusion and complementarity are dialectical opposites. In terms of the current status of literary research in China, it is necessary to conduct in-depth research and interpretation of the subtle relationship between literature and science, which is both similar and different, both close and distant, both resisted and accepted, using interdisciplinary methods. This will help us accurately grasp the development and evolution of literature and its characteristics, and further contribute to the construction of a discourse system for literary studies in China (Jiang, “On the Relationship between Romanticism and Natural Science” 155).

Conclusion

In his engagement with literary trends, Jiang provides a comprehensive, invaluable survey and summary of scholarship, research, and problems that have been tackled by the disciplines, and proceeds to offer new insights and provides a credible theoretical model of literature in his works on 19th-century western literature, which is a wise and hopeful attempt to guide research in directions that will genuinely articulate and advance our knowing of literature. While Jiang’s works on 19th-century western literature will resonate primarily with academic audiences—and not only in literary studies, but with scholars of intellectual history and popular culture as well—their readability and straightforward analyses should make them attractive to a general readership as well. Accordingly, Jiang’s works will serve as a key reference point for the fast-growing body of scholarship on 19th-century western literature.

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