

Wang Ning and China's Perspective on World Literature: An Introduction

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Abstract: Wang Ning is one of the most important and influential scholars in humanities studies in contemporary China. This special issue analyzes his world literature studies in the context of the global debate about the notion of world literature, aiming to explore Chinese critic's contribution to the development of this field. It consists of 10 articles and 1 commentary contributed by scholars from institutions of different parts of the world, such as the United States, Belgium, South Korea and China. It argues that the contributions of Wang Ning's world literature studies are as follows: 1) constructing Chinese literary critical discourse; 2) securing the place of Chinese literature and scholarship in world literary academia; 3) deconstructing western-centrism in the world literature studies of current international academia.

Keywords: Wang Ning; China; world literature; international academia

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标题: 王宁与中国的世界文学研究：引言

内容摘要: 王宁教授是当代中国最为重要和最具影响力的人文学者之一。本专辑论文将其世界文学研究置于全球世界文学论争的语境中进行分析，探讨中国学者对世界文学研究作出的贡献。本专辑包括 10 篇论文和 1 篇评论文章。论文的作者除数位中国学者外，还包括多位来自美国、比利时和韩国著名高校的学者。本专辑认为王宁教授的世界文学研究主要有以下贡献：1) 在国际学界构建中国批评话语；2) 拓展中国文学和中国学术在国际学界的影响力；3) 解构当前国际学界以西方为中心的世界文学研究。

关键词: 王宁；中国；世界文学；国际学术界

作者简介: 邹理，文学博士，上海交通大学外国语学院助理教授，主要从事英语与比较文学研究。本文为上海市哲学社会科学青年项目“英语抗战文学中的上海叙事研究”【项目编号：2019EWY003】的阶段性成果。

Wang Ning is one of the most important and influential scholars in humanities studies in contemporary China. Wang has held professorships in prestigious Chinese institutions such as Peking University and Tsinghua University, and is now working as Distinguished University Professor of Social Science and Humanities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University. In previous decades, he made eminent contributions to challenging Western-centric assumptions and knowledge production practices in the present construction of world literary system and to worlding Chinese literature and Chinese scholarship in international academia.

Wang has published an impressive number of articles in a wide range of journals such as *New Literary History*, *Modern Language Quarterly* and *Critical Inquiry*, and his theories for understanding the present global system of literary exchange and consumption have been well recognized by his Western counterparts. For instance, in 2011, he had an in-depth discussion about world literature with another eminent scholar, David Damrosch, at the Fifth Sino-American Symposium on Comparative Literature, which was published in the journal *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* (2011). In this dialogue, Wang shared his four world literature criteria: 1) whether a work has been translated into other languages; 2) whether it has been included in “some authoritative anthologies of world literature”; 3) whether it has reached a wide range of readers and become the “inheritance of different generations of writers”; 4) whether it has been critically responded to by critics of other countries or cultural contexts (177). Damrosch admitted that while there was some difference between their views on world literature, he did agree with the criteria Wang put forward, especially Wang’s views on the role of literary anthology, translation and the quality of literary texts in the formation of world literature system.

Due to Wang’s impressive contributions, dozens of institutions in countries such as the United States, the UK and France have invited him to give lectures about his views on comparative literature and world literature studies. For example, in 2005, on the invitation of Gayatri C. Spivak, Wang gave a lecture on post-colonialism and world literature at Columbia University. Three years later, in 2008, Wang was invited by Homi Bhabha and Damrosch to give a lecture on reconstructing Neo-Confucianism in a post-colonial context at Harvard University. In the same year, Wang shared his perspective on comparative literature and world literature studies at the Center for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Cambridge. In 2015, Wang was invited to lecture at the National Humanities Center, United States, on Chinese literature as world literature. At Sorbonne Université in France in 2015, Wang presented his views on

cosmopolitanism to French scholars. In 2019, Wang gave a keynote speech at the triennial conference of International Comparative Literature Association about his visions of world poetics. In line with Wang's eminent contribution to comparative literature and comparative culture studies, the Academy of Latinity and Academia Europaea elected him as a foreign member respectively in 2010 and in 2013. Wang's world literature scholarship enjoyed immense popularity in the Western countries.

Wang's scholarly oeuvre of world literature studies, which leads to his wide reputation at home and abroad, are inspiring and beneficial for our further research, especially, in positioning Chinese experience in the development of world literary tradition and examining the deficiency of the present structure of world literary system, which constitute the main motivation for this special issue. Chinese experience, specifically, Chinese literary writing and theoretical constructions, played an important role in shaping the world literary tradition. In the introduction of the special cluster *Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Chinese Fiction* in the leading English literary journal *Modern Fiction Studies*, Wang, together with Charles Ross, offers an extraordinary analysis of the role of Chinese fiction in forming the notion of world literature and its map. Through reading the relations between Eastern and Western literature, their analysis shows that Chinese fiction is of great value to the development of the western literary tradition and has served as a critical resource in inspiring the critical tradition of western literature. Wang points out that "Thomas Percy's 1761 translation of *Hau Kiou Chooan* (*The Pleasing History*), as well as some other Chinese literary works of minor importance" inspired the German literary giant Goethe to form the Utopian conception of world literature (582). Goethe did not have "access to the better Chinese novels, such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*, if he had, he would have been even more astonished at the great achievements made by eminent Chinese writers" (582). Implicit in Wang's argument is that it is important for the western literary field to translate and read the masterpieces of Chinese literature.

In contemporary era, in resonance of China's increasingly important role in the process of globalization, Chinese experience becomes an integrated part of the world system in all sorts of aspects. Wang puts the case succinctly in the introduction of the special issue *Chinese Encounters with Western Theories*, which he edited with Marshall Brown in *Modern Language Quarterly*:

Still, it remains a society undergoing rapid change, and powerful winds are blowing from China toward the rest of the world. Political, economic, ecological, and even, in recent years, public health concerns have been thrust

from China into the western consciousness. We, as well as literary scholars in the west, cannot stop thinking about China [...] Every year Chinese scholars publish original theoretical works and translations of western scholarship, organize many conferences on literary theory, and engage in discussions on issues of literary creation and criticism. There also continues to be enthusiastic debate on cutting-edge theoretical issues in the Chinese context, such as postmodernism and its critical and creative reception in China, Derridean deconstruction, Edward Said's orientalism, Fredric Jameson's Marxist-postmodernist theory, the crisis of comparative literature and the rise of world literature, and parallel elements of cosmopolitanism in the West and in ancient China. (Wang and Brown 245-246)

The truly radical idea in Wang's arguments is that the development of world literary thoughts and literary traditions was not possible without experiences from China. It is hard to imagine how Chinese experience might ultimately be excluded from the global system of literary studies. Sadly, our current world literary system lets us down. Chinese cultural and literary experiences in the global system and Chinese scholars' theoretical contributions are not appropriately treated in the dominant world literary theoretical constructions. Revathi Krishnaswamy makes precisely this point in his article "Toward World Literary Knowledges: Theory in the Age of Globalization" published in *Comparative Literature*: "assorted texts from the world's literary traditions are not only sorted into genres identified and defined by the Western theoretical tradition, they also are interpreted and judged according to Western literary norms" (402). Present world literary academia mainly takes experiences from the western cultural and literary contexts as the epistemological framework to address the world system that deals with the production, circulation, exchange, and consumption of literary texts from all countries.

In *What is World Literature?* David Damrosch points out, regarding world literature, "a category from which nothing can be excluded is essentially useless" (110). This remark is reasonable and implies complex power relationships both between the world literature agencies and object literary texts, and between the included and the excluded. Regarding the ways literary texts from non-European countries are included in the running of the current world literature system, Damrosch notes that they have to objectify themselves, constitute themselves as subjects, and at the same time bind themselves to violent reshaping of the mechanisms and calculation of the Anglo-American cultural political power. The American institutions, book market and cultural economies, or, in other word, the

American experience in the era of globalization, become the dominant forces in shaping the world literary system. We also see the dominance of western agencies in the works of another leading world literature scholar, Franco Moretti. In his book *Distant Reading* (2013), Moretti proposes to treat literary texts as digital data, and tends to use computational methods to investigate the law of the global literary system. It is not hard to notice that the digital system analysis technologies Moretti recommends are the hallmark strengths of western countries.

As we look at the dominance of western experiences in these leading western critics' construction of world literature, we face the daunting situation that international literary academia still does not give enough attention to experiences from non-European countries such as China. As a response, this special issue offers a set of articles to address the eminent Chinese critic Wang's literary theoretical constructions so as to highlight China's contribution to the international literary academia. These articles mainly analyze Wang's contributions in the following five aspects (some of these articles addressed all five aspects; nevertheless, we have categorized them according to their main focus):

1) Comprehensive analysis of Wang's world literature studies and his theoretical contributions. Shang Biwu's "From World Literature to World Poetics: Wang Ning's Scholarship of Literature Studies" examines the significance and implications of Wang's studies in Chinese literature and world literature, Chinese-Western dialogue on and reconstruction of literary theory, and world poetics and cosmopolitanism. While discussing Wang's achievements in these fields, Shang shows that Wang not only goes deep into the cutting-edge issues of international academia, but also "goes beyond the hedgehog-fox divide and is well-accomplished in all and each of the scholarly areas," such as psychoanalysis, postmodernism, post-colonialism, globalization, translation studies, literary theory, world literature and comparative literature. Simon C. Estok in his article "Wang Ning and Shakespeare" explores the similarities between Wang Ning's scholarship and Shakespeare's literary writings. Based on an analysis of the shared characteristics in Wang and Shakespeare's works, he points out that "like Shakespeare, Wang magnifies and reflects the trends of his time" and brings to international society a "vibrant [Chinese] culture." He also suggests that the "growing immensity of his impacts, both in established scholarly areas and in newly emerging ones" is difficult to calculate.

2) Wang's construction of Chinese literary critical discourse. Yao Lingling in her article "Chinese Literature as World Literature: Re-imagining the World Literary Scene and Re-visualizing Chinese Literature in the Age of Globalization" analyzes Wang's studies of the world literature system, East-West literary relations

and film adaptation of literary works, arguing that Wang is “a visionary Chinese literary theorist and comparatist” who attempts to construct and promote a Chinese literary discourse in international academia. It shows that Chinese literary critical discourse features in most of Wang’s oeuvres not as a utopian concept but as a specific system that includes strategies in translation, film adaptation of literary works, sinicized world literature concepts and reevaluations about the function of western literary institutions. Yao notes that Wang’s efforts in constructing a Chinese literary discourse contributes to a more democratic world literary system and a new understanding of cosmopolitanism, which consistently influences the works of Chinese humanities scholars. In resonance with the emphasis on the critical role of translation in Yao’s studies, Liu Dan and Xiong Hui in their article “Translation and Reconstruction of World Literature: A View of Wang Ning’s Concept of World Literature” delivers a comprehensive analysis of the function of Wang’s translation theories in constructing his world literature discourse with Chinese characteristics, and points out that Wang’s translation strategies not only provide a path for the literature of those less powerful nations to enter the core of the world literary arena, but also deconstructs the superiority of western cultures.

Yang Chan’s article “Wang Ning’s Theoretical World and Its Application: Cosmopolitanism, World Literature and the Internationalization of the Chinese Humanities” works from Wang’s reconstruction of western world literature concepts in his development of Chinese literary discourse to his strategy to promote it in international society. Through an analysis of the sources of knowledge in Wang’s reconstruction of the notion of world literature and cosmopolitanism, and his strategy of promoting Chinese literary discourses, this article shows that with his broad knowledge and vision about culture and literature from both China and western countries, Wang draws critical resources from Chinese social, literary and intellectual experiences in the era of globalization as well as resources from western philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx and Johann Wolfgang Goethe to form his own notion of world literature and cosmopolitanism.

3) Securing the place of Chinese literature and scholarship in world literary academia. In the article “Wang Ning: Sinicizing World Literature,” Theo D’haen notes that Wang is “one of the most productive Chinese comparative and world literature studies scholars of the past four decades.” Through reading the relationship between Wang’s treatment of “native-grown Chinese works, traditions, methods, and approaches” and his “translating, interpreting, and adapting Western models for use with reference to Chinese literature and literary studies,” this article shows that Wang has been “instrumental in securing for Chinese literature and literary

studies a more prominent place on the maps of comparative and world literature studies, paralleling China's growing global importance in all other fields." Thomas O. Beebee's article "Wang Ning, Inc.: Intercultural Collaborations in the Study of World Literature" addresses specific activities Wang conducted to secure the place of Chinese literature and scholarship and promote transnational academic communication. After examining Wang's achievements in "areas of collaboration and team-building that have taken on the dimensions of a corporate approach to literary and cultural investigations," Beebee shows that Wang's academic activities, such as "hosting of international scholars and conferences, production of journal special issues with cogent introductions, engagement in translation projects, and intervention in critical debates and controversies," opened "spaces for Chinese-North American intercultural communication." Liu Kang's article "Chinese Encounters with Western Theories: A Metacommentary" analyzes Wang Ning and several other scholars' essays about the relationship between western and Chinese literary theories published in the special cluster "Chinese Encounters with Western Theories" in *Modern Language Quarterly*, arguing that "the historical facts of modern China, especially the history of reform and opening up of the last four decades, show that China is in the world and the world is in China," and that "the relationship of universalism and exceptionalism" is "overdetermined by multiple factors of integration and complementarity."

4) Deconstructing western-centrism in the world literature studies of current international academia. In the article "The Conception of World Poetics and the Forming of a Global Academic Community," Sheng Anfeng examines Wang's "achievements in the fields of comparative and world literature, and in the promotion of Chinese scholarship in the world during the past forty years," and notes that Wang's theoretical constructions, especially his reconstruction of the concept of world poetics, contribute significantly to "break the Western-centric mindset" in literary studies, and to make Chinese scholars' voices "heard in the international academic community, and to construct a Chinese literary theory discourse." "A loosely-structured, preliminary global academic community" featuring non-western countries, such as China's voices, begins to take shape. In the final article in this special issue, together with Yang Yi, I stress as well Wang's achievement in deconstructing western-centrism in current world literature studies and note that Wang is one of the most important figures in this international debate about world literature. In our article titled "New World System and New World Literature Framework: A Comparative Analysis of Wang Ning and David Damrosch's World Literature Studies," we argue that Damrosch's construction

of world literature has traces of ‘enlightened conservatism’ ,” and “Wang’s world literature studies deconstructed Damrosch’s world literature framework by first revealing the referential crisis in Damrosch’s theory and then re-establishing the referential connection by reconsidering the ordering principles, interpretation framework, and agencies of world literature according to newly emerging world structures.” Instead of providing an expanded version of the previous Euro-American-centred notion of world literature, Wang brings forth “a more balanced notion of world literature which takes into account literature of all countries and regions and at the same time emphasizes the quality and world influence of certain literary texts.”

Over the past forty years, Wang has worked with all his energy to invent and practice new approaches to advance scholarship in literary theory, comparative literature and world literature studies, deconstruct western-centrism and develop Chinese literary discourses. His eminent achievement in these areas not only provides new and important theoretical frameworks for international literary academia, but also will continue to shed light on the researches of future scholars both from China and from other countries.

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