

Wang Ning, Inc.: Intercultural Collaborations in the Study of World Literature

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Abstract: This paper examines the achievements of Wang Ning in the areas of collaboration and teambuilding that have taken on the dimensions of a corporate approach to literary and cultural investigations. Wang Ning has opened spaces for Chinese-North American intercultural communication through affordances such as the 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.

Keywords: Wang Ning; Lin Shu; world literature; literary theory; postmodernism; interculturality

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标题: 王宁：世界文学研究中的跨文化合作

内容摘要: 本文考察了王宁在跨国文学与文化研究团体合作和团队构建层面所取得的成就。研究认为，他通过举办国际学术会议、推动国际学者交流、编辑主题专辑、主持翻译项目以及积极的与国际同行展开对话和讨论为中国—北美跨文化研究和合作提供广阔的空间。

关键词: 王宁；林纾；世界文学；文学理论；后现代主义；跨文化性

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I coin the title of my paper off of Michael Hill's 2013 study of the famous Chinese

translator, Lin Shu. Hill titles his book *Lin Shu, Inc.: Translation and the Making of Modern Chinese Culture*. The basic story of Lin Shu (1852-1924), who became responsible for the popularity of the modern Western canon in China by rendering into classical Chinese the oral reports of those who could read the original in French or English, is known to pretty much every scholar working in the late Qing to May Fourth period of Chinese literature. Hill's study points out two aspects of Lin Shu's incorporation into the efforts of others: the "translation workshop" that he established and supervised, and the backformation of translation effects on Qing intellectuals that made Lin Shu a powerful cultural broker in the late nineteenth century.

Fast forward almost exactly a century, and we find one strong similarity, namely the importance of what Zhang Chunjie has designated as "interculturality" to the modification and hopefully betterment of Chinese intellectual trends (Zhang Chunjie, *Transculturality and German Discourse* 9-10). In Wang Ning's terms, Chinese literary scholars in the last decades of the twentieth century recognized that Chinese thought needed to be regenerated through synthesis with Western theories and ideas. We could even compare the role played by the Taipei Rebellion in Lin Shu's early years to the impact of the Cultural Revolution in Wang Ning's. Both were nativist, restorative upheavals that gave rise to cosmopolitan counter-movements in subsequent decades. In the following, I will deal with the second parallel associated with the counter-movement: intercultural collaboration in the form of articles and special issues published in North American journals. In particular, Wang Ning has been tireless in his contracting for, assembling, contributing to, and providing insightful introductions to special issues that have facilitated Chinese-American interculturality.

Indeed, Wang Ning himself has spoken of the special role of organization and intercultural exchange in an article honoring the editing and mentoring prowess of one of his North American collaborators, Ralph Cohen, best known as the founding editor of *New Literary History*. Wang Ning writes: "In the history of literary studies, as well as in the humanities more generally, there are two sorts of people who influence and push forward the development of literary studies in a particular cultural context: one by means of insightful theoretical thinking, the other by means of organizational ability" (Wang, "Ralph Cohen" 739). Besides Cohen, Wang Ning also praises Fredric Jameson as uniting these two talents. Jameson, even more than Cohen, is known as a brilliant critic and theorist. Quite likely Wang Ning is all that too, but the side of him that I can testify to on the basis of thirty years' acquaintance, and that I have been able to follow in English, is that of an

intellectual entrepreneur and synthesizer. This brief article examines the vision of world and comparative literature, and of Chinese literature and criticism's place in these formations, that he has promoted as a collaborator and promoter of Chinese scholarship in English. This approach will give, most certainly, only a partial view of Wang Ning's contributions to world literature. I will be leaving out his own concentrated area of scholarship, for example his work on the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen, and of course the hundreds of articles and chapters that he has published in Chinese.

As an intense scrutinizer and interpreter of developments in Western literary theory, Wang Ning has moved nimbly to address one topic after another in the fast-moving development and counter-development of critical positions. The first of his engagements that I will talk about is with postmodernism. When I was an undergraduate college student, postmodern authors such as William Gass, John Barth, and Donald Barthelme dominated the syllabuses of courses in American literature. In the Spanish Department where I spent more of my time, magic realism was the rage, and I remember hearing a talk given by José Donoso. (I also heard one delivered by William Gass). Graduate school was more of the same, though now with the addition of poststructuralism into the mix. The trend seemed to peak with the publication in 1991 of Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism; Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Only a mature cultural formation could be defined and explained as well as Jameson did it in that book.

Like a tsunami wave sloshing slowly eastwards, postmodernism finally arrived in China about the time that Jameson's book appeared. Or was that really Chinese postmodernism? According to Jameson's formula, postmodernism was a phenomenon of late capitalism. Could we apply that descriptor to the Chinese economic formation in the 1990s? This was the question that Wang Ning chose to tackle in the first essay I will be examining, "The Mapping of Chinese Postmodernity," published in *boundary 2* in 1997. Wang Ning is the sole author of this article, but clearly it is the result of a collective effort at achieving an intercultural understanding of postmodernism for which he was both witness and catalyst. Nothing tells this story of interculturality more clearly than footnote 18 of the article:

Ihab Hassan was invited to lecture at Shandong University and Nanjing University 1982, but he did not speak on postmodernism; Fredric Jameson gave a series of lectures on postmodernism and contemporary Western cultural theory at Peking University and Shenzhen University in 1985, and lectured

again on issues relevant to the question of postmodernism in Shanghai and Beijing in May 1993; Douwe Fokkema lectured on post-modernism at Nanjing University and Nanjing Normal University in 1987, and at Peking University in September and October 1993; Hans Bertens gave a keynote speech at the International Conference on Postmodernism and Contemporary Chinese Literature in 1993 in Beijing; and Terry Eagleton and Jonathan Arac gave keynote speeches on postmodernism at the International Conference on Cultural Studies: China and the West, in Dalian in 1995. (Wang, “The Mapping of Chinese Postmodernity” 27n18)

It is hard to decide whether Wang Ning’s being present at all these events is more or less remarkable than his having knowledge that they all took place. I am not sure which is the case here, but either way, the result is an abbreviated cultural history of when and how critical evaluations of postmodernism arrived in China (Adoption of postmodern techniques by writers and artists no doubt preceded this critical reception).

Years later, Wang Ning made another collaborative attempt at a more inclusive view of what constitutes—or by this time, what constituted—postmodernism by organizing a special issue for the journal *Narrative* that appeared as the third number of 2013: *Postmodernist Fiction: East and West*. The international cast of contributors was especially impressive, ranging from Theo D’haen in Belgium to Tatsumi Takayuki in Japan. Brian McHale, the dean of postmodernism studies, contributed an afterword. Wang Ning’s own chapter dealt with the avant-garde in China, focusing on a single author, Mo Yan, who had been awarded the Nobel Prize in 2012, as Wang Ning mentions in his article. He chooses for his analysis one of the celebrated author’s lesser-known works, *Bliss*. Wang Ning concludes, “If we [...] analyze Bliss from the perspective of psychoanalysis, we readily find further elements of postmodern psychoanalysis, such as the paranoid and even schizophrenic dream of Yongle, which certainly diverges from orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis, sometimes in an antithetical and ironic way” (Wang, “A Reflection on Postmodernist Fiction” 305). That Mo Yan’s constant narrative experimentation arises from the fact that he takes the calling of literary creation seriously is also an important factor to consider, Wang Ning reasons (*loc. cit.*).

Following on the heels of postmodernism and world literature came the next wave, in the first decade of the twentieth century: an extensive discussion of the “death of theory.” Terry Eagleton’s *After Theory* (2004) and Gayatri Spivak’s *Death of a Discipline* (2005) were exemplary publications contributing to this debate.

With his usual acuity, Wang Ning arranged for a symposium called “The Ends of Theory” co-hosted between Tsinghua University and the journal *Critical Inquiry*. This was the occasion when I made my own first trip to China at the invitation of Wang Ning, taking part in a panel presentation by journal editors, and presenting nearly the last paper of the conference, a trial run at my concept of transmesis that would eventually be developed into a monograph and published in 2014. Two years later, Wang Ning co-authored a retrospective of the conference with the editor of *Critical Inquiry*, the eminent scholar W. J. T. Mitchell. Wang Ning, as shown above, has spent much time and effort explaining the capacity of Western literature and culture for reshaping critical discourses in China. Was it Wang, or was it Mitchell who decided to reverse the question? Here is the sentence where the reversal happens: “One must ask [...] what is happening to Western traditions of literary and cultural theory—and of critical thought more generally—as they encounter the overwhelming reality of China: the unrivalled depth and antiquity of its intellectual and cultural traditions; the sheer abundance of its human resources?” (Mitchell and Wang 278). It is a question that we all continue to grapple with.

This Mitchell/Wang speculative question was redefined in a remarkable epistolary dialogue between Zhang Jiang of the Chinese Academy of Social Science and J. Hillis Miller, emeritus professor at Yale and University of California—Irvine. Their exchange was published in the journal *Comparative Literature Studies* as an “Exchange of Letters About Literary Theory” (Zhang and Miller 2015) preceded by Wang Ning’s introduction. In retrospect, Zhang appears in this dialogue to be warming up for his 2020 publication in *Philosophy and Literature* on what he calls the “theory void.” Zhang’s concluding paragraph to the later article provides a summary of his position:

How should *we* criticize and learn from the diversified Western theories of our age—specifically for their conclusions, achievements, value orientation, methodological stance, and influence on human spiritual science and ideological progress—in order to change the habit of blind compliance and following that *we* used to have, and then how should *we* promote the healthy growth of China’s own theory? This is not only a major problem in contemporary literary theory but also an important issue that humanities scholars should ponder seriously and then offer their responses. (Zhang Jiang, “On Theory-Centrism” 104; emphasis added)

I have highlighted the repeated use of “we” in this passage, given that it is a shifter

and the reader is unsure how inclusive it is meant to be—until the appearance of “China” as a possessive, that is. The exhortation to “us” to halt our “blind obedience” to theory is apparently aimed at Chinese scholars, who are asked to develop their own theories (It is not clear why Zhang does not acknowledge some of the theoretical developments that had already occurred, such as ethical theory, neo-Confucian strains, and variation theory, all of which have a Chinese pedigree, and all of which have been circulating for some time now).

Zhang’s earlier exchange of letters with J. Hillis Miller, published in *CLS* with an introduction by Wang Ning, makes the later article seem like an effect caused by the teaching moment in that correspondence when Miller tries to explain, one-on-one, what deconstruction is and isn’t. The exchange of letters resembles a fencing match with much thrust and parry, more about getting out of the other’s way than landing a blow. True to its topic of deconstruction, it is characterized more by refusals to answer than by positive assertions. Zhang wants Miller to recognize the paradox of his identification of themes in literary works as dependent on an idea of the stability of textual meaning that deconstruction denies the existence of. Miller is happy to discuss what deconstruction is and isn’t, while also denying the label of deconstructionist, inasmuch as every attentive reading of a text will have elements that escape the straitjacket that a theory—any theory—might try to impose on its reading: “To a considerable degree, a literary work’s excess over theory results from the ways a poem or a novel is not like a mathematical equation to be solved or a philosophical argument to be judged true or false” (Zhang and Miller 587).

What Miller wants from Zhang, and never gets, is a confession of what is at stake for the latter in accepting or denying the claims of theory. Miller uses supposition to create straw positions for Zhang concerning the fundamental questions of why and how literature should be interpreted. For example, in the first letter:

You [Zhang] say: “The question haunting me for [a] long [time] is whether a definite text has a relatively definite theme which could be generally identified by most people.” Just why is that so important a question for you? Please explain so I can understand better what is at stake. My guess is that you believe that if “most people” will identify a “relatively definite theme” in a given “definite text,” then most readers will agree about how to read the work in question. That will create a community of readers who are in tune with one another. (Zhang and Miller 572)

Zhang does not respond to this invitation to clarify his motivations. His second letter asks whether deconstruction can provide a “universal guide” to the implementation of literary criticism. Miller tries once again to get to the bottom of this quest for universality:

My guess is that you [Zhang] think this is important because if such a complete set providing universal guidance exists, then we have a basis on which we can all teach and write about literature in the same way. All students can be expected to know this “complete set.” All will use this set and this set alone in the practice of reading literature. Examinations can be based on this universally agreed upon “set of systematic criticism.” A universal community of those who know, accept, and use it will be created and maintained. Tremendous social and educational advantages would seem to follow from the creation of such a community, you appear to assume. (Zhang and Miller 586)

Zhang responds in his next letter that “my concern with this issue expressed in the previous letter is not based on educational considerations, but on doubts about the position of deconstruction” (Zhang and Miller 593). Miller goes to elaborate lengths of mind-reading in his attempt at creating a specific purpose for Zhang’s (dis)engagement with deconstruction as a necessary framework for determining the value of deconstruction. Zhang finally throws off the mask of innocent questioner and confesses that his real motivation is to refute deconstruction, as he will in the 2020 article apparently refute all of “Western” theory.

Wang Ning’s task in his introduction was to create value out of questions and answers that do not directly engage each other. J. Hillis Miller was among the most prominent theorists in the US and a good friend, while Zhang Jiang was a close colleague. Wang starts by assigning the best of motives and intentions to both correspondents:

The following exchange between two eminent Chinese and Western literary theorists will reveal to our international audiences how Chinese literary scholars are enthused by Western literary theories, how they conscientiously study an important Western literary critical work and raise relevant, challenging questions, and how they are very eager to have dialogues with their Western counterparts on issues concerning literary studies. Readers will also see how a senior Western literary theorist like J. Hillis Miller patiently and seriously

answers his Chinese colleague's questions and gives his dynamic responses. In this way, a dialogue between Chinese and Western literary theory and scholarship has been effectively carried out through the international lingua franca of English. (Wang Ning, "Introduction: Toward a Substantial Chinese–Western Theoretical Dialogue" 562)

Wang Ning goes on to identify and quote the most informative points made by each of the two interlocutors. By the end of his introduction, the reader is ready to absorb the most useful points made by each interlocutor. Wang Ning has coached the two sides into a team effort.

Owen Aldridge, the founding editor of *Comparative Literature Studies*, had forged a strong relationship with scholars in Japan, especially ones at Nihon University, and together with Masayuki Akiyama he created a biennial East-West issue of *CLS* that began in the early 1970s, and that was quite forward-looking for its time. Upon the retirement of Professors Akiyama and Aldridge, the enterprise struggled to find interest and support at Nihon, and Wang Ning and Kang Liu of Shanghai Jiao Tong University were eager to accept the challenge of holding up the "Eastern" pillar of the comparative enterprise. Special issues of *CLS* sponsored by SJTU have addressed the following topics: Modern China and the World: Literary Constructions 49.4 (2012); Global Maoism and Cultural Revolutions in the Global Context 52.1 (2015); Comparative Literature in East Asia 54.1 (2017); Ecocriticism in East Asia: Toward a Literary (Re) Construction of Nature and Environment 55.4 (2018); and Technology in Comparative Literature Studies 57.4 (2020). My own favorite of these was, of course, the one on comparative literature in East Asia. As a complit nerd, I am obsessed with discovering how scholars in various parts of the world play at the game of comparison, and thus I was greatly rewarded in seeing the diverse voices weigh in on the topic of comparativism. I profited from Youngmin Kim's account of the status of comparative and world literature studies in Korea. (Kim is university distinguished professor, and director of the Institute of Trans Media World Literature at Dongguk University in Seoul.) I learned from Biwu Shang of Shanghai Jiao Tong University about the peculiarities in the Chinese versions of narratology (prompted, of course, by the distinctive tradition of Chinese narrative), while Massimo Verdicchio of the University of Alberta taught help me recognize Du Fu as a world author. Wang Ning's own contribution revealed Chinese perspective on gender studies in the post-theoretical era. He made use of his vast array of scholarly connections to bring together these and other brilliant writers for this issue, an even dozen in all.

Among the more recent collaborative projects of Wang Ning, and the last one I will speak of, is a special issue, “Modern Chinese Literature from Local to Global,” published in the *Journal of Modern Literature* in 2021. Wang Ning co-edited this with his colleague at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Peng Qinglong. The ten articles are meant to open readers’ eyes to the many contributions that Chinese literature has made to world literature. Wang Ning’s opening statement, that “the relations between world literature and modern Chinese literature have not yet been fully discussed” (Wang, “Editor’s Introduction” 1) strikes me as accurate. First of all, the aspect of world literature that cause it to function as a hypercanon in some contexts has meant an outsize focus on classical works—the Tang Dynasty poets, the great novels/romances, and the classic works of “philosophy” such as the work that has received the most translations into English, the Tao Te Ching. The millenia-long Chinese literary tradition blots out the sun for most contemporary works, whereas for many postcolonial literatures the opposite is true—many African literary traditions are treated as though they began only with the introduction of writing in a European language.

Translation must certainly be recognized as a form of collaboration, often of a unique nature in that the parties—author of the text in the source language and translator of the text into the target language—do not confer directly with each other and the final product—the translated text—is created in a serial process. Thus, an enormous collaborative program set in motion by Wang Ning involved the translation into Chinese of three journals known for their theoretical approach to literature: *boundary 2*; *Critical Inquiry*; and *New Literary History*. He indeed, he reports on the results of the earliest parts of this effort, which have sold many copies in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. He recognizes the resistance to his project in some quarters in China: journals that fear the competition; and scholars who are not fully attuned to the advantages of being able to dialogue with the rest of the world through the medium of a shared critical and theoretical. Wang Ning puts a brave face on the eventual success of his translation project:

Chinese literary and cultural studies, due to the translation of these journals, will move closer and closer toward the international community, thereby having equal dialogues with the latter. Since most of the articles published in the above-mentioned journals anticipate their authors’ substantial research and profound thinking of cutting-edge theoretical issues, they will certainly provide illumination to our own theoretical reflections. (Wang, “Translating Journals into Chinese” 653)

I am unable to give an overall assessment of how long this project lasted, or how many total pages from these three journals ended up being translated into Chinese. Certainly, the connection with *Critical Inquiry* remained strong into the next decade, as noted above.

In conclusion, the main thesis of *The World Republic of Letters* by Pascale Casanova reminded us in a forceful manner that our view of world literature remains partial and misleading if it restricts itself to texts and authors. World literature is equally—or perhaps more—a product of its mediators: translators, publishers, literary critics, teachers of literature, government functionaries, and literary entrepreneurs. Wang Ning is a prime example of a mediator, and his contributions to the development of interculturality between China and the US, Orient and Occident, have been considerable and very much worth praise and celebration.

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