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Through the Literary Lens: A Review of *Postmodern Thought and Historical Writing*

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Abstract: *Postmodern Thought and Historical Writing*, authored by Pang Hao, stands as a landmark work in China's historiographical theory field in recent years. Taking "historical writing" as its focal point, the book systematically examines the complex interplay between postmodernism and historiography spanning half a century since the 1970s. Beyond clearly outlining how postmodernism reshapes historical scholarship through five key themes, i.e. language, power, grand narratives, representation, and knowledge, the work also addresses prevalent misconceptions and controversies surrounding postmodern theories in Chinese academia through rigorous textual analysis and historiographical research. This paper argues that the book's value lies not only in its comprehensive review of postmodern trend's interactions with western historiography, but more importantly in providing theoretical resources with significant reference value for hot topics in literary studies such as "non-fiction writing" and "new popular literature and art." By revealing profound transformations in historical writing across narrative and fictional dimensions, the book opens new dialogic spaces for literary researchers to explore intricate relationships between literature and history, reality and fiction, as well as elites and the masses.

Keywords: postmodern thought; historical writing; non-fiction writing; new popular literature and art

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标题：透文学之“眼”——评《后现代思潮与历史书写》

摘要：庞昊的《后现代思潮与历史书写》是近年来国内史学理论领域一部具有里程碑意义的著作。该书以“历史书写”为切入点，系统梳理了20世纪70年代以来后现代思潮与历史学长达半个世纪的复杂互动。本书不仅清晰勾勒了后现代思潮如何通过语言、权力、宏大叙事、表现与知识五个关键主题重塑历史学的问题意识与实践方式，更以扎实的文本分析与史学史梳理，回应了国内学界对后现代理论的诸多误读与争议。本文认为，该书的价值不仅在于其对后现代思潮与西方史学互动过程的全面回顾，更在于它为文学研究领域中的“非虚构写作”“新大众文艺”等热点议题提供了极具参照价值的理论资源。通过揭示历史书写在叙事性、虚构性等层面的深层变革，本书为文学研究者思考文学与历史、真实与虚构、精英与大众之间的复杂关系，开辟了新的对话空间。

关键词：后现代思潮；历史书写；非虚构写作；新大众文艺

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1. Introduction to the Book

Postmodern Thought and Historical Writing, authored by Pang Hao, emerged at a seemingly paradoxical moment: the peak of postmodern trends in the field of historiography had already faded. As John H. Zammito observes, “as a phase within the argumentation surrounding historical practice, postmodernism has come to an end” (2013, p.12). However, it is precisely at this turning point of “the ebb of tide” that Pang Hao keenly identifies a crucial academic opportunity: the decline of postmodern thought does not signify the disappearance of its influence; rather, it provides us with a perspective for “organization and reflection,” enabling contemporary scholars to “comprehensively examine the impact of postmodern thought on historiography and provide a balanced assessment of its contributions and limitations to its development” (2025, p. back cover).

The entire book centers its research on “historical writing,” a choice that itself reflects the author’s profound understanding of the complex relationship between historical practice and theoretical reflection. According to Pang Hao, historical writing can be seen both as a direct manifestation of postmodern thoughts

influencing historiography and as a practical arena where historians apply, critique, and revise postmodern theories (2025, p.9). By focusing on the specific and detailed aspect of “historical writing,” the author successfully avoids the vagueness and abstraction commonly found in historical theoretical research, grounding the theoretical discussion firmly within concrete historical texts and writing practices.

In terms of structural organization, this book demonstrates remarkable logical rigor. The author divides the five core themes recurrent in postmodern thought, i.e. language, power, grand narratives, representation, and knowledge, into five dedicated chapters, examining respectively how these themes have entered the historical discipline’s framework, influenced historians’ research paradigms and modes of writing, and enabled historians to critique and refine postmodern theories throughout this process. These five themes are not arranged arbitrarily but follow an inherent logical progression: language and power constitute the fundamental prerequisites enabling historiography; grand narratives and representation serve as the modes of presentation in historical research; and knowledge represents the ultimate goal of historical inquiry. This structural arrangement enables the book to comprehensively illustrate the interaction between postmodern thought and historiography while maintaining a clear analytical thread and coherent argumentative rhythm.

At the methodological level, Pang Hao demonstrates solid academic expertise and a broad scholarly perspective. In the first section of each chapter, the author first revisits the original arguments of postmodern theorists (such as Saussure, Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard), integrating the latest research findings to faithfully reconstruct their original intentions; then examines how postmodern historical theorists (including Hayden White, F. R. Ankersmit, and Keith Jenkins) applied these ideas to the field of historical theory; finally, in the second and third sections, the author analyzes how postmodern thought takes root in actual historical practice through detailed examinations of specific historical writings. This progressive framework of “theory–history of theory–historical practice” ensures that the book can combine theoretical depth with substantial historical rigor.

Notably, the author provides a meticulous analysis at the micro level of historians’ reception of postmodern theory. He observes that historians’ understanding of postmodern theory sometimes exhibits a phenomenon of “indigestion,” which can manifest as either superficial misinterpretation or creative appropriation. For instance, while analyzing Robert Darnton’s *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, Pang Hao points out that although the work is relatively superficial in terms of theoretical insight, its pioneering nature and significance in the historiography cannot be overlooked (2025, p.100). This objective attitude, which affirms contributions while not shying away from problems, runs throughout this book, enabling it to avoid the extreme stances of “apologetics” or “criticism” common in many academic works, and presenting a rare balance and prudence.

2. The Interdisciplinary Dialogue between “History” and “Literature”

As a seminal work in historiography, this book integrates postmodern thoughts within the framework of historical discipline itself, presenting five themes through a progressive logical framework. Among these, the

chapters on “historical representation” and “historical knowledge” particularly highlight the interdisciplinary nature of historiography. When it comes to “historical representation,” Pang Hao transcends the traditional distinctions between concepts such as “historical compilation” and “historical narrative,” employing the term “writing” to integrate various historical texts. In the chapter on “historical knowledge,” the author further elaborates on “historiography as literature and art” through the section titled “Beyond Historical Knowledge.” This integration of truth and imagination in historical writing further facilitates interdisciplinary dialogue between history and literature. The book’s re-examination on the essence of “historical writing” resonates strongly with contemporary literary and cultural studies’ focus on hot topics, such as “non-fiction writing” and “new popular literature and art,” serving as a concrete demonstration of its practical relevance.

Firstly, the book’s redefinition of “historical writing” to transcend traditional boundaries in literary and historical disciplines, has promoted academic scholars to reconsider the interplay between “literariness” and “authenticity.” This focus resonates intriguingly with current discussions on “non-fiction writing” in literary studies. “Referring to the rise of ‘non-fiction writing’ in the Chinese literary field of the new century, which has garnered widespread attention and become a widely debated literary phenomenon (or trend), the key reason cited is the commitment to and pursuit of ‘truth’” (Ouyang, 2025, p.14). In recent years, non-fiction works such as Chinese writer Liang Hong’s “Liangzhuang” series and Chinese-Canadian writer Chen He’s *Bukit Merah Camp* (《米罗山营地》), have sparked intense discussions among literary critics regarding issues like “truth,” “being present,” and “witnessing.” These works often operate at the boundary between literature and history, between documentary and fiction, and their authors range from professional writers to scholars, journalists, and even ordinary individuals. Just as Deng Xiaomang notes, “the truth of history is the truth of human nature; it possesses objectivity, not absolute objectivity, but objectivity permeated with subjectivity” (2013, p.105). This phenomenon precisely illustrates that how postmodern thought has challenged and transformed the traditional concept of “historical writing,” fundamentally altering both its subject and form.

Secondly, this book’s systematic examination of postmodern linguistic criticism provides literary researchers with valuable theoretical resources for contemplating the narrative qualities of non-fiction works. Hong Zhigang highlights the limitation of such works as “weak artistic quality,” which manifests in “most authors overemphasizing narrative authenticity and excessively highlighting the creator’s own cognition and reflections, resulting in a narrative process that... strives to objectively portray the real experiences of characters... attempts to reinforce the authenticity of historical records... and is permeated with subjective interpretations and value judgments” (2016, p.70-1). It is not difficult to observe that non-fiction writing is often simplistically understood as “truthful recording,” with its literary quality regarded as a supplement or embellishment to “truth.” However, Pang Hao’s reference to the New Cultural History’s assertion that “language is not a ‘transparent medium’” to deconstruct historical writing, and citation of Hayden White’s four tropes as well as narrative structures to argue that “there is no essential difference between historical writing and literary writing” (2025, p.14, 12), both break down the disciplinary boundaries by postmodern

thought. This insight reminds us that the “truth” in non-fiction works does not merely present self-evident objective facts; it also constructs a “sense of authenticity” through specific narrative strategies. This is precisely a defining characteristic of non-fiction writing that engages with real society under the guise of “truth.”

Thirdly, the book’s discussion of postmodern critiques of power offers a crucial critical perspective on the issue of “new popular literature and art” within literary and cultural studies. The term “new popular literature and art” refers to “a comprehensive overview of the various emerging literary and artistic forms and cultural phenomena in today’s internet environment. It represents the concentrated manifestation of artistic innovation under internet conditions and, more importantly, a new cultural form that aligns with social development in the new era while fulfilling people’s spiritual and cultural needs” (Zhang, 2026, p.1). In today’s era dominated by mass media, emerging cultural forms are gradually replacing the traditional artistic production mechanisms that have long concentrated “art” exclusively in the hands of a select few, enabling ordinary people to become creators of art as well. As Pang Hao repeatedly emphasizes in his book, a key aspect of postmodern thought is precisely “breaking down the divide between elites and the masses” (2025, p.5). This judgment resonates strongly with the theoretical discourse on “new popular literature and art” in recent literary studies. Furthermore, Pang Hao’s caution that “experimental historiography risks falling into the trap of consumer capitalism” (2025, p.290), encourages contemporary scholars to adopt a dialectical perspective toward this emerging cultural phenomenon. While “new popular literature and art” aligns with social trends like modernization, technological advancement, and de-elitization, this phenomenon raises questions: is it merely a new wave of “popularity-driven products” shaped by mass consumer markets? By catering to public expression desires, does it simultaneously undermine the potential for deep reflection and critical engagement? These questions invite endless contemplation.

Finally, the book’s discussion on critiques of postmodern grand narratives offers a new perspective for literary researchers to examine the ethical issues surrounding historical narrative. A shared characteristic of non-fiction writing and “new popular literature and art” is its focus on the destinies of “ordinary people.” By reflecting the vicissitudes of an era through individual fates, these works strive to capture the life experiences of common individuals at a micro level, thereby challenging the approach of simplifying history to grand narratives. In analyzing microhistory writing, Pang Hao holds an opinion that the postmodern critique of grand narratives has prompted historians to focus on the “ordinary people” and “the other” in history. However, Pang Hao does not fully endorse microhistory writing. “The postmodern critique of grand narratives laid the foundation for the emergence of new grand narratives. Macro-history and Deep History are attempts by historians to reconstruct grand narratives and grand theories” (Pang, 2025, p.198). This in-depth exploration of a global perspective has inspired literary scholars to ask: do non-fiction works that focus on individual destinies truly address the structural causes of individual suffering, or do they merely remain at the level of being “moving,” thus becoming objects of “emotional consumption”?

3. Contributions of the Book and Discussions

Overall, the academic contributions of *Postmodern Thought and Historical Writing* can be summarized in the following dimensions.

Firstly, it provides an interdisciplinary research paradigm. The book's research approach, i.e. alternating between theoretical exploration, engagement with writing practices, and subsequent theoretical reflection, serves as a valuable model for interdisciplinary studies. Rather than simplistically opposing history and literature, the author reveals their commonalities in narrative, rhetorical, and expressive dimensions, thereby facilitating interdisciplinary dialogue between the two fields.

Secondly, it expands postmodern historical research. As the author notes in the review section, although considerable scholarly discussions have taken place domestically and internationally on postmodern historical writing, "no comprehensive work has yet been published to examine the relationship between postmodern thought and historical writing" (Pang, 2025, p.37). The publication of this book, to some extent, effectively addresses this research gap. Through rigorous historical documentation and theoretical analysis, the author provides readers with a comprehensive overview of the nearly half-century-long interaction between postmodern thought and historiography relatively well.

Thirdly, it clarifies the misinterpretations of postmodern theories within the domestic academic community. The author repeatedly emphasizes in multiple chapters that researchers' understanding of thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida is often one-sided or even erroneous. For instance, he explicitly states that Derrida's assertion that "nothing exists outside the text" does not deny the existence of the real world, but rather underscores that "language can only convey meaning within a specific context"; similarly, Foucault's critique of knowledge and power does not advocate for knowledge relativism, but rather urges vigilance toward systematic knowledge (Pang, 2025, p.291). These clarifications hold significant academic value for fostering a more accurate understanding of postmodern theory within the domestic academic community.

However, any work inevitably leaves room for further discussion. In the fields of literature and cultural studies, the intersection of "postmodernism" and "historical writing" has also sparked considerable academic debates.

① Debates regarding the relationship between "postmodernism" and "popular culture and art". In the process of discussing how postmodern thought breaks down the divide between elites and the masses, this book places greater emphasis on postmodern theorists' "explanations" and "affirmations" of this phenomenon, while dedicating relatively less attention to its inherent complexity and contradictions. In recent years, with the rise of "new popular culture and art," cultural researchers have increasingly recognized that popular cultural production is not inherently liberating. Forces such as algorithmic recommendations, the traffic economy, and emotional consumption may more effectively shape public expression than traditional elite systems. As Xu Jing illustrates, "the extreme emotional outbursts and highly homogenized micro-series narratives of 'domineering tycoons' and 'revenge' that we see on screens appear, on the surface, to be choices made by consumers autonomously; in reality, however, they represent a form of reverse conditioning imposed

by platform algorithms through data-driven analysis of human weaknesses and widespread social anxieties” (2026, p.12). Can postmodern theories sufficiently aid us in critiquing this new cultural production mechanism? This is perhaps a question that warrants further exploration.

② Questions regarding the narrative paradox of “non-fiction writing.” This book highlights the similarities in narrative structure between historical and literary writing, which is undoubtedly enlightening for understanding non-fiction writing. However, we also need to consider whether there exists a narrative ethics of “non-fiction” in the present day, where the boundary between “non-fiction” and “fiction” is increasingly blurred. In other words, when we acknowledge that all the writings are narrative construction, do we thereby lose the criterion for the distinguishment between “truth” and “falsehood”? Pang Hao observes that “for historiography, a discipline aimed at seeking truth, the dissolution of knowledge itself signifies its death” (2025, p.239). This assessment equally applies to literary studies. If non-fiction writing degenerates into mere narrative textual games, how can its ethical power as “witness” be demonstrated?

③ Questions regarding the tension between “microscopic writing” and “structural criticism”. While acknowledging the humanistic concern inherent in micro-history writing, this book also identifies its potential “nihilistic” tendency. This indeed is a profound insight. However, in concrete literary criticism practice, how can we delve into individual life experiences without neglecting critical engagement with structural issues? Does any writing approach exist that can establish an effective theoretical bridge between the microscopic and the macroscopic? These questions may require further dialogue between literary studies and historical theories.

④ Regarding the intersection of “posthumanism” and “new popular literature and art.” The third chapter of this book, states that “the introduction of posthuman thought ... also suggests that historians can write a comprehensive history from a posthuman perspective” (Pang, 2025, p.198). This perspective can equally be extended to literary studies. In recent years, the rise of posthumanist approaches in science fiction, AI-driven writing, and cybernarratives has been transforming our recognition of “literature” and “writing.” As writing is no longer confined to human authors and “authors” may include artificial intelligence systems like algorithms, do we need to reconsider the essence of “non-fiction writing”? Although the book touches upon the topic of posthumanist thought, it does not provide an in-depth analysis.

4. Conclusion

Pang Hao’s *Postmodern Thought and Historical Writing*, is a work that combines profound theoretical depth with substantial historical rigor. It doesn’t only provide a systematic overview of the complex interplay between postmodern thought and historiography within the domestic academic community, but also offers valuable theoretical insights into hot topics in literary studies, such as “non-fiction writing” and “new popular literature and art”, through its incisive analysis of historical writing. In an era where postmodern thoughts are gradually receding, the significance of this book may precisely lie in prompting us to reconsider: how do we inherit the legacy of a theory after its decline, critique its limitations, and build upon this foundation to embark on new academic explorations? As the author notes in the conclusion, “the retreat of postmodern thoughts

doesn't signify the demise of Barthes, Foucault, or Derrida" (Pang, 2025, p.291). Similarly, the decline of postmodern thoughts doesn't signify the end of our discussions about their legacy. On the contrary, it is precisely after this "retreat" that we can more calmly examine the thinkers who were swept along by the "tide" and more clearly reflect on the academic issues that were once dominated by it. In this sense, *Postmodern Thought and Historical Writing*, as a brilliant "flower" blossoming from the fertile soil of "literature-history integration," has effectively and profoundly advanced postmodern historical research while offering valuable insights for fields such as literary and cultural studies.

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