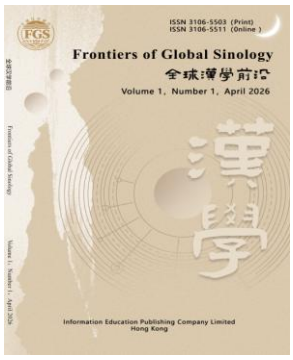

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Traces of China in the World Literary Field: Mapping the Inner Journey of Chinese Writers Going Global—A Review of *The Iowa International Writing Program and the Internationalization of Contemporary Chinese Writing*

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Abstract: Deng Rubing's new book, *The Iowa International Writing Program and the Internationalization of Contemporary Chinese Writing*, the concept of going global is interpreted as the rupture from the classical view of the world under heaven to the modern worldview. Through detailed observations of Chinese writers activities abroad, the book reduces the grand proposition of Chinese literature moving from a closed space to the global literary field into concrete historical scenes. It deeply portrays how writers internalize foreign experiences into the spiritual process of transforming their creative work, revealing, on multiple levels, the reasons behind the "internationalization" of contemporary Chinese writing. From the historical gatherings in "China Weekly" to the contemporary practice of "creative writing", the book outlines a cultural reflection intertwined with mirroring and identity, implements "internationalization" as concrete experiential reality, and constructs the "International Writing Program" as a "literary site" for Sino-foreign literary exchange. It presents the trajectory of China in the global literary field and makes an outstanding contribution to the "going out" of Chinese culture.

Keywords: Iowa; International Writing Program; Contemporary Chinese Writing; Intercultural identity; Internationalization

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标题：世界文场的中国行迹：重绘中国作家“走向世界”的心灵版图——评《爱荷华“国际写作计划”与当代汉语写作的“国际化”研究》

摘要：邓如冰新著《爱荷华“国际写作计划”与当代汉语写作的“国际化”研究》通过将“走向世界”阐释为从古典“天下观”到现代“世界观”的断裂，对中国作家在异域活动的细致观察，将中国文学从封闭空间走向世界文场的宏大命题还原为具体的历史现场，深描作家如何将异域体验内化为创作转型的心灵历程，多层次揭示了当代汉语写作“国际化”进程的因由。从“中国周末”的历史相聚到“创意写作”的当代实践，勾勒出镜像与认同交织的文化省思脉络，将“国际化”落实为具体的实感经验，将“国际写作计划”建构为中外文学交往的“文学现场”，呈现了世界文场的中国行迹，为中国文化“走出去”做出了卓越贡献。

关键词：爱荷华；国际写作计划；当代汉语写作；跨文化认同；国际化

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Introduction

From the late Qing intellectuals' awakening, amid a sense of spatial fragmentation, that there existed a world beyond "China", to the May Fourth generation's fervent call to join the modern current of world literature, and then to the post-Reform era, when Chinese writers crossed the Pacific with their physical, lived experience—the proposition of "going global" has always been entangled with the desire for national rejuvenation, the pain of cultural anxiety, and the difficulty of subjective reconstruction. Professor Cheng Guangwei (2012, p. 121) argues that "the concept of 'going global' functions as an engine", while Deng Rubing (2025, p. 5) points out that on "the road to the 'modernization' of Chinese literature, this is a historically significant expression with original driving force."[1]"Going global" has long been one of the core issues of concern in sinology both at home and abroad; however, discussions on it have often remained at the level of macro-level theoretical debates or one-directional influence studies, while detailed investigations into specific historical fields, on-site atmospheres, and other such concrete conditions have largely been lacking. Professor Cheng Guangwei's (2012, p. 121) warning, "Without understanding the specific historical fields, on-site atmospheres, and other detailed conditions of 'overseas dissemination', our research may only leave a conceptual impression", remains profoundly insightful today. It is within this academic context that Deng Rubing's new book, *The Iowa International Writing Program and the Internationalization of Contemporary Chinese Writing*, reveals its unique value.

[1] Deng Rubing (2025): *The Iowa International Writing Program and the Study of the Internationalization of Contemporary Chinese Writing*, University of International Business and Economics Press. Subsequent citations will only indicate page numbers, without further elaboration.

This book takes the University of Iowa's "International Writing Program" (IWP) as its central hub, reducing the grand proposition of Chinese literature "going global" to a series of concrete, micro-level historical sites. The so-called "world literary field" refers both to the landscape of world literature and to the specific arena in which Chinese writers walk, collide, and transform—Iowa is precisely such a world literary field, one that possesses both geographical space and literary field significance.

Since Nie Hualing and Paul Engle founded the IWP in 1967, it has invited over 130 Chinese writers (including those from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan region) for residential exchanges. From Xiao Qian and Bi Shuowang stepping onto American soil in 1979 as the first icebreakers, to Wang Meng writing *Various Colors* by the banks of the Iowa River, and then to Wang Anyi, Wang Zengqi, Yu Hua and others undergoing their respective transformations in a foreign land, this literary encounter spanning more than forty years constitutes an abridged spiritual history of the "internationalization" of contemporary Chinese literature.

The book consists of ten chapters in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction begins with the collapse of the classical "Tianxia worldview", interpreting "going global" as a rupture in spatial conception. The first two chapters focus on the founding of the IWP and the operational mechanisms of its "field". Chapters three to five outline the generational changes and shifts in the voices of Chinese writers within the IWP. Chapter six centers on "China Weekend", presenting the gathering of writers from both sides of the China Taiwan Strait. Chapters seven to ten select four different writers for in-depth case studies, closely linking their overseas experiences with specific creative transformations. The conclusion draws implications for contemporary Chinese literature from the "Sinicization" of the writing program, the introduction of writers-in-residence, and the establishment of the "creative writing" discipline.

How to handle traditional culture and foreign influences has always been a common issue faced by contemporary writers situated between the East and the West. This book fully demonstrates the interaction between Chinese literature and the world, bringing different writers into view and exploring their subjectivity and dynamism. From it, we can see how literature establishes connections between history and the present, revealing the reasons for the "internationalization" of the Chinese language, thus injecting new vitality into the research field of the internationalization of contemporary Chinese. This paper aims to explore the book from three different levels, striving to reveal its breakthroughs and implications.

1. Rupture and Space: The Writing of Space from "Tianxia Worldview" to "Literary Field"

Scholar Wang Furen (2000) points out that modern and contemporary Chinese intellectuals underwent a decisive turn in spatial cognition: they discovered a "Western world" juxtaposed with "China", and this sense of spatial fragmentation completely dismantled the classical Tianxia worldview. In the classical "Tianxia worldview", the sky is round and the earth is square; all within the four seas are the king's land, and China is both the geographical and cultural center. The modern worldview, according to Deng Rubing, however, is one that separates and juxtaposes "China" with other spaces. It is precisely within this separated spatial structure that "going global" truly becomes possible. The proposal of this framework lays a solid theoretical foundation for the entire book, extricating "internationalization" from abstract literary-historical narratives and restoring it to a concrete spatial practice.

Based on this transformation in spatial conception, the author focuses her research on Iowa City, USA. Iowa is "located in the American interior, far from the East and West Coasts, in contrast to the prosperity and flashiness of the two coasts, it signifies 'tradition' and all characteristics associated with 'tradition'" (p. 12). This geographical marginality precisely makes it a symbolic "literary field"—it is both the crossroads where contemporary Chinese writers enter the Western perspective, a window through which Western writers understand Chinese literature, and an intermediate zone where Eastern and Western literature converge. Grounding the grand proposition of "going global" in the concrete space of Iowa is itself a methodological self-awareness; it means that the researcher refuses abstract influence discourse and instead chooses to explore the real trajectories of literary encounters within specific historical sites.

This self-awareness in spatial writing is also reflected in the author's invocation of Foucault's genealogical method. Foucault (2001) emphasizes "dispersion" and "accidental events", requiring that all past events be preserved in their specific state of dispersion rather than being subsumed under some necessary historical logic. Thus, Deng Rubing (p. 17) suggests that "the IWP can be understood as a 'network of relations', where all its participants—including founders, administrators, individual writers, sponsors, and even opponents—collectively construct different facets of this historical 'site'". This methodological stance runs through the entire book; it is not a demonstration of the inevitability of "going global", but a meticulous presentation of the various contingent factors, individual choices, and complex interactions within this process. The examination of Nie Hualing and Engle in Chapter One is a typical example. The author does not reduce these two founders to mere ideological symbols but delves deeply into their personal histories and emotional worlds, presenting the tension between Nie Hualing's cultural identity of "roots in mainland China" and Engle's "American Dream", and showing how, from a position neither left nor right, they built a platform for world literature to transcend the barriers of the Cold War. This approach of understanding an "institution" through the lens of "individuals" within specific historical situations is precisely a concrete practice of the genealogical method.

It is worth noting that the spatial writing in this book does not stop at the geographical level but extends further to the examination of discursive space and psychological space. The author's emphasis on the dialogical nature of the IWP constitutes a construction of discursive space. Engle once recalled: in the IWP corridor, writers from East and West Germany drank beer and joked about "the Wall", while Chinese from the Mainland and Taiwan region valued temperament more than differences .[1]These warm historical details reveal the essence of the IWP as a "dialogic space"—born in the Cold War era yet transcending Cold War thinking, committed to stitching together spirits torn apart by ideology. This dialogical quality is also fully manifested in "China Weekend".

Moreover, the author's portrayal of individual writers' "culture shock" constitutes an analytical dimension of psychological space. Whether it is Wang Meng's "bewilderment" in Hong Kong, Wang Anyi's novel experiences in American supermarkets, or Wang Zengqi's shedding of his shell to become a "carefree immortal" in a foreign land, these shifts in psychological space precisely represent the most intrinsic

[1] Engle, Paul: "Intenational Writing Program (1967-1988)", https://iwp.uiowa.edu/sites/iwp/files/21yrsIWP_testimonials: (pdf. 4-5).

dimension of "going global". As the author states, to study "how to go global", one must focus on the writer's subjectivity and delve deeply into the inner world of specific individuals. This approach, which combines external spatial practice with internal psychological transformation, gives the spatial writing in this book a three-dimensional and profound quality.

It can be said that "space" is the concept that runs throughout this book. It is both the starting point of the research—introducing the spatial prerequisite of "going global" through the collapse of the "Tianxia worldview"—and the object of the research—constructing Iowa as a "literary field" for Sino-foreign literary encounters. Moreover, it is also a methodology—through historical details within concrete spaces, it reveals the complexity and contingency of the "internationalization" process. It is precisely based on this self-awareness in spatial writing that the book is able to step out of the single paradigm of "influence studies" and turn its gaze toward richer interactions and generativity.

2. Exotic Land and Echo: Writers' "Culture Shock" and Creative Transformation

When writers cross national borders, the sights and shadows of foreign lands are like stones cast into the lake of the heart, stirring layers of echoes. Whether facing the vertigo of bustling cities or encountering the impact of heterogeneous cultures, the "culture shock" induced by these echoes often becomes a hidden driving force for writers' creative transformation. From Xiao Qian and Bi Shuowang setting foot on American soil in 1979 as the "first icebreakers", to Wang Meng writing *Various Colors* by the banks of the Iowa River, and then to Wang Anyi, Wang Zengqi, and Yu Hua undergoing their respective "transformations" in foreign lands, the author meticulously presents how different generations of Chinese writers, stimulated by their overseas experiences, reflect on themselves, reconstruct their identities, and achieve breakthroughs. This literary encounter spanning more than forty years constitutes a spiritual map of Chinese writers "going global".

Xiao Qian and Bi Shuowang were the first Chinese writers to visit the United States after the establishment of Sino-US diplomatic relations. Xiao Qian (2005, p. 501) described his trip to Iowa as "returning to the world for the first time after being cocooned for thirty years". This veteran writer, who had studied in Cambridge in his early years and was well-versed in Western culture, displayed remarkable candor with a pragmatic attitude. In his lecture at "China Weekend", he neither shied away from discussing the damage inflicted upon Chinese literature by the decade of social upheaval nor failed to emphasize the development of the literary scene after the "reversal of verdicts". This consciousness of speaking out in a foreign land was the first step in "going global". Xiao Qian's icebreaking journey conveyed the voice of an open Chinese literature.

In 1980, when Wang Meng, as one of the first writers of the new era to go abroad, asked himself under the neon lights of Hong Kong, "Is this the dregs of capitalism?" a profound "bewilderment" arose in his heart. This almost conditioned reflex o

f vigilance embodied the dilemma of "globalization" faced by a generation of writers. When he actually set foot on American soil and faced "another world", this vigilance transformed into a deeper theoretical anxiety: "I need an ideological explanation, an ideological positioning, a conceptual pivot" (Wang Meng, 2007, p. 119). Amid this bewilderment of dislocation between theory and reality, Wang Meng wrote the novella

Various Colors on the banks of the Iowa River. Deng Rubing points out that the story of Cao Qianli and the old horse trudging through a Xinjiang valley in *Various Colors* was not, as commonly believed, a metaphor for China suffering under the extreme leftist line; rather, it should be seen as Wang Meng's spiritual projection of "reflecting on himself" in a foreign land. He later confessed in his autobiography the different meaning of *Various Colors*: "This meaning lies in the meaninglessness, confusion, and near loss of meaning" (Wang Meng, 2007, p. 106). The author reinterprets this story against the backdrop of his "American experience", revealing its particularty in Wang Meng's creative career, and clearly points out that it breaks free from the "revolutionary paradigm" narrative and turns toward an existentialist concern with the state of life.

If Wang Meng's "bewilderment" was more of an intellectual shock, then Wang Anyi's American experience was more embodied. In 1983, Wang Anyi accompanied her mother Ru Zhijuan to Iowa. This period, as she herself stated in *A Conversation* (2011, p. 80) with Zhang Xinying, was a "crucial juncture in her writing career". The author meticulously reconstructs Wang Anyi's various "culture shocks" in a foreign land: the dazzling array of goods in supermarkets, the roaring crowds at American football stadiums... These "strange things" unlocked her imagination, delineating a picture of material "modernization" in very concrete ways. Even more decisive was her encounter with Taiwan region writer Chen Yingzhen. On that ecstatic football field, when Chen Yingzhen shouted at the frenzied crowd, "Fools! All of you fools!" Wang Anyi suddenly realized the loneliness of the two of them, Chinese, within this sea of joy. This loneliness was precisely a mirror-like self-affirmation; in a foreign country, Wang Anyi discovered "China" and also discovered herself. After returning home, she wrote *Xiao Baozhuang*, a masterpiece of root-seeking literature, which was precisely the literary presentation of "that chaotic, ambiguous, wild, stagnant ancient world" (p. 197) she had "discovered" abroad. The author points out that Wang Anyi's "American experience" transformed her from an empiricist into a technician, leading her to contemplate the "material part of the novel", thereby laying the conceptual foundation for her subsequent ten-year period of exploratory writing.

Unlike Wang Anyi's youthful vigor, the sixty-seven-year-old Wang Zengqi displayed a kind of "shedding of the shell" born of weathered experience while in Iowa. In 1987, this elderly writer, who called himself a "nut", cracked open his hard shell in a foreign land. The author quotes from Wang Zengqi's (Volume 12, 2019, p. 218) family letter: "My wife wrote to me saying that I have completely opened up, breaking through many of the Confucian constraints". On foreign soil, he felt as if his thoughts had been in uniform; amid heterogeneous reading, he discovered himself like a rusted-shut window. In Iowa, he danced, drank, painted, and gave away his artworks—all of which were Wang Zengqi's (Volume 12, 2019, p. 215) escape from and reaction against the fact that "so many movements have been carried out in the country, making human relations extremely cold".

More importantly, Wang Zengqi accomplished a crucial "late-life transformation" in his writing career while abroad: rewriting *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. These new meanings of Liaozhai were not simple classical rewrites but rather "preserving the plots of traditional works as much as possible, while making changes at key points and injecting modern consciousness". (Wang Zengqi, Volume 3, 2019, p. 86) From the lyrical world of *The Oath of Love* and *The Tale of Big Nur*, to the modern consciousness of *New Meanings of*

Liaozhai, Wang Zengqi achieved self-breakthrough in a foreign land, then chose to return to national tradition and realism. This was precisely the self-positioning he found within the coordinates of world literature after "shedding his shell".

If the overseas experiences of the first three writers carried a sense of "culture shock" impact, then Yu Hua's case presents another form entirely.

In 2003, Yu Hua spent seven immersive months in the IWP, an experience that gave birth to the writing of *Brothers*. "What a Westerner would need four hundred years to live through—two vastly different eras—a Chinese person experiences in just forty years" (Yu Hua, 2012, p. 631). This "condensed" drama became the core theme of *Brothers*. From the "historical China" of *To Live* and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* to the "contemporary China" of *Brothers*, Yu Hua's transformation was likewise triggered by his overseas experience. Compared to the other three writers, in Yu Hua's foreign experience, "shock" had given way to comparison and reflection.

Looking at the individual experiences of these writers as a whole, a clear trajectory from icebreaking to deepening can be seen. Together, they prove that "going global" was never a one-way influence or reception, but rather a complex process in which Chinese writers, stimulated by overseas experiences, reflect on themselves, reconstruct their identities, and achieve breakthroughs. What Yu Hua saw abroad was the unchanging nature of Westerners; it was precisely "because he saw how unchanged they were overseas that he understood how tremendously China had changed" (Xia Yu, 2016, p. 263). This dialectical logic of affirming the "self" through the "other" and looking back at "home" from a "distant place" is the deeper significance of "internationalization" for Chinese writers.

3. Mirror and Identity: Cultural Reflections from "China Weekend" to "Creative Writing"

In 1979, when Xiao Qian and Bi Shuowang visited Iowa, Nie Hualing initiated a gathering called "China Weekend". In addition to the writers participating in the IWP residency, she also invited several Chinese writers and scholars living in the United States, achieving the first reunion of writers from both sides of the China Taiwan Strait since 1949. Although the writers held diverse views, all their speeches pointed to a common spiritual origin: what Nie Hualing called "feelings for the entire Chinese nation."[1]（UIWP, p. 40）

Xiao Qian (2005) specially recorded a touching detail: that evening at a gathering at Engle's home, the writers sang various folk songs. When the melody of "My Home Is on the Songhua River in the Northeast" began, "several Taiwan region writers looked impassioned, tears welling up in their eyes". Behind these tears lay a mirror-like experience that transcended political barriers. Meeting their compatriots in a foreign land, they saw another self and affirmed the same cultural bloodline with common roots. As Taiwan region writer Ye Weilian (UIWP, p. 49) stated, "compatriots living in two regions of China... look forward to our common efforts to revive a new cultural China." He believed that this gathering might become the beginning of cultural

[1] The quotation is from Nie Hualing's opening remarks at the symposium "The Future of Chinese Literary Creation", printed in China Weekend: A Gathering of Chinese Writers from Home and Abroad in Iowa (1980), compiled and published by the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, and distributed by Heaven and Earth Books Ltd. Hereafter abbreviated as UIWP.

unification and an effort to revive a new cultural China. The author, with delicate brushstrokes, reconstructs this historical scene, allowing readers to glimpse how literature can transcend political barriers and accomplish a confirmation of national identity across thousands of miles.

The significance of "China Weekend" lies not only in the gathering at that historical site but also in its enduring cultural resonance. After returning to China, Xiao Qian wrote articles such as "Nie Hualing from Hubei" and "Ye Weilian the Root-Seeker", making him one of the first in Mainland China to introduce Taiwan region writers and overseas Chinese writers. The encounter between Wang Anyi and Chen Yingzhen gave birth to *Utopian Poems*, a "spiritual autobiography" that influenced Wang Anyi's creative direction for decades to come. Pan Yaoming conducted extensive interviews with visiting Mainland writers, producing his distinctive series "The Faces of Mainland Writers". These literary interactions, born out of the IWP, continued to spread like ripples, weaving a dense cultural network across the two sides of the China Taiwan Strait and among overseas Chinese. The author reassembles these scattered fragments from the depths of history, presenting how literature can serve as a spiritual bond connecting dispersed hearts and linking the bloodline of the Chinese nation.

If "China Weekend" represented mirroring and identification at a historical site, then China's active transplantation of the IWP model in the new century demonstrates a more self-aware cultural identification. Deng Rubing traces the "Sinicization" of the IWP: the International Writing Center at Bohai University, the "Two Mountains Writing Camps" on Lushan and in Tangshan, and the most successful and influential "Shanghai Writing Program". The latter, initiated by Wang Anyi in 2008, was inspired precisely by her four-year IWP experience, which led her to wonder whether China could have its own writing program. From "going out" to "inviting in", this is itself a meaningful practice of cultural identification: China is no longer just a recipient of world literature but has become an active participant and organizer.

Even more institutionally significant is the establishment of the resident writer system and the discipline of "creative writing" in China. Since Ocean University of China invited Wang Meng and others as its first writers-in-residence in 2002, many domestic universities have successively established distinctive writer-in-residence programs. The introduction of the "creative writing" discipline has further brought the traditional question of "whether writers can be cultivated" into the higher education system. Using her own classroom observations at the University of Iowa, the author presents the "creative writing" workshop, where teachers and students participate together in literary creation. This new model of teacher-student relationship and curriculum is quietly transforming the literary education ecology in Chinese universities.

From "China Weekend" to "creative writing", from the mirroring at historical sites to the identification in contemporary practice, the author outlines a clear trajectory of cultural reflection in this book. The core of this trajectory is the generation and deepening of identification—not only identification with national identity, but also identification with a model of literary exchange, with a concept of creative writing education, and with the way Chinese literature "goes global". When Chinese writers reflect on themselves in foreign lands, they affirm their cultural roots; when China actively invites writers from around the world to come in and establishes its own "writing programs" in universities, a more subject-conscious cultural posture is taking shape.

The "Sinicization" of the IWP is both a deepening of Sino-foreign literary exchange and an adjustment of Chinese literature's self-positioning; it is both an appropriation of a successful model and a creative transformation within the local context. The deep driving force behind this transformation is precisely the dialectical logic of affirming the self through the other and looking back at home from a distant place, which is repeatedly presented in the book. As Nie Hualing said at "China Weekend": "We come from different regions, some from thousands of miles away... to Iowa. This very fact shows that we still have something in common—that is, our feelings for the entire Chinese nation" (UIWP, p. 40). This passage may well serve as the best footnote for understanding the theme of "mirror and identity" in this book. Whether at historical sites or in contemporary practice, this pursuit and affirmation of "something in common" has always been the spiritual undertone of Chinese writers "going global".

Conclusion

Taking a panoramic view of the entire book, Deng Rubing's new book, *The Iowa International Writing Program and the Internationalization of Contemporary Chinese Writing* lays its foundation in spatial theory, proceeds to in-depth case studies, and then connects past and present, presenting a clear academic trajectory. It retrieves the authentic texture of history from contingency and detail, directing its gaze toward the complex process through which writers reflect on themselves in foreign lands. Transcending one-directional "influence studies", it makes the detailed description and analysis of specific events a key focus of research. With its writing style of concrete, micro-level observation and incisive, almost surgical analysis, it not only responds to Cheng Guangwei's academic warning but also provides a model worthy of reference for contemporary Chinese language and sinology studies, opening new horizons for research on the internationalization of the Chinese language and making significant contributions to the study of contemporary Chinese writing.

When we turn our gaze toward specific historical sites and individual experiences, sinology studies gain a firmer texture and richer layers. The value of this book lies not only in its redrawing of a spiritual map of Chinese writers "going global", but also in its showing us that every step toward the world is a spiritual journey of affirming the self through the other.

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