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## **Context, Method, and Vision: A Review of Zhang Songjian's *The Cold War and the Literary Imagination in Asia***

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**Abstract:** Zhang Songjian is a renowned scholar in the field of Chinese-language literary studies. In recent years, he has produced a succession of outstanding academic works, achieving notable accomplishments in the integration and innovation of texts, theory, and cultural vision. In his new book *The Cold War and the Literary Imagination in Asia* (2024), he once again handles a weighty subject with apparent ease, using the Cold War as context, method, and vision to deeply excavate, sort out, and discuss marginal or dual-faceted writers who exist outside the purview of Asian national literature. Grounded in solid historical materials and written with penetrating prose, the book brings back to life the creative careers of individuals who drifted between politics and literature only to be eventually submerged by history, while beneath its academic discourse there runs an undercurrent of emotional identification. Yet the book's unique value lies even more in its attempt, by precisely grasping the literary discourses and their social connotations of various writers in a specific context, to construct a kind of spiritual poetics with a pronounced political orientation, thereby challenging our conventional understanding of the boundaries, connotations, and functions of Chinese-language literature, and suggesting possible directions for interdisciplinary research.

**Keywords:** Cold War; Zhang Songjian; *The Cold War and the Literary Imagination in Asia*

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**标题:** 语境、方法与视野——评张松建的《亚洲冷战与文学想象》

**摘要:** 张松建是华文文学研究界的知名学者，近年来笔耕不辍，接连出了不少优秀的学术论著，在文本、理论与文化视野的融合与创新方面有所建树。新作《亚洲冷战与文学想象》中，他又一次举重若轻，以冷战为语境、方法和视野，对流离在亚洲民族国家视野之外的边缘或双栖作家进行了深入挖掘、梳理和论述。该书以扎实的史料和具有穿透力的笔触，重现了一个个流离在政治与文学领域却终被历史淹没的创作生命，在学术话语的逻辑之下隐含着情感认同的张力。但该书的独特价值还在于，研究者通过准确把握特定语境中各位作家的文学话语及其社会内涵，试图创建一种富含政治性指向的心灵诗学，并在一定程度上挑战了我们关于华文文学边界、内涵与功用的惯常理解，启迪了跨学科研究的可能方向。

**关键词:** 冷战；张松建；《亚洲冷战与文学想象》

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### 1. Reconstructing the Asian Cold War Context and Rediscovering the Meaning of Chinese-Language Literature (and Writers)

In his preface, Zhang Songjian offers a comprehensive review and conceptualization of the Cold War. It is clear that while his understanding continues the basic insights of previous scholars, his perspective is not on the front line of the US–Soviet confrontation but returns to the scholar's own situation—Asia. In other words, the Cold War was the grim reality of ongoing hostility between the two blocs after World War II, and the resulting ideological consequence was inevitably the solidification and permeation of binary modes of thought. Yet for individuals living through it, the manifestations of the Cold War varied with place and time; each person's experience was unique, with differences often overshadowing similarities. Thus, when Zhang approaches the relationship between the Cold War and Chinese-language literature through case studies, his first task is to reconstruct the Asian Cold War context as a folded zone. That is to say, in Cold War-affected Asia, there existed a diversity and strategicity of cultural forms, and coexistence, opposition, and transformation between different ideological currents were not absent. In fact, in the postwar imagination and practice of Asia, the example of Qian Mu's New Asia College (1949–1965) (Liu Qiang, 2024) provides a model. In commercialized Hong Kong, Qian Mu simultaneously pursued the revival of traditional Chinese culture and the construction of a grand vision for a "New Asia," carrying out a fruitful educational practice that embodied a cultural strategy of wavering between or transcending binary oppositions. Relatedly, Zhang's observation of Cold War Asia also reveals

a cultural overlapping map constituted by transnational diasporic individuals. What these diasporic figures share, besides their concentrated spiritual attachment to Chinese language (and Chineseness) and the cultural tradition behind it, is a mobile and transitional course of action that transcends binary oppositions. To be precise, this is an expression of the cultural subjectivity of the Chinese diaspora. From Qian Mu to Zhang Songjian, one can discern an academic tradition centered on the construction of diasporic Chinese cultural subjectivity. Perhaps, using language as home and literature as weapon, the voices of Chinese diasporic writers are faint and diffuse—like a requiem scattered by the Cold War winds, gradually fading with time. Yet when scholars retrieve these voices, scattered outside literary history, and give them their due place and value, the significance of Chinese-language (and Chinese) literature unfolds.

Han Suyin, as the first case study in the book, plays a foundational role in setting the argumentative tone. She is a diasporic writer who cannot be inscribed into any national literary history. A Eurasian, she published twenty or thirty works in English and French in her lifetime, yet it is difficult to place her within the English or French literary lineage. Although her works were not written in Chinese, many were translated into Chinese and gained wide influence in the Chinese-speaking world. But in Zhang's view, Han Suyin is more than a writer; she is also an important social activist, herself constituting a mobile network for observing the Asian Cold War. Thus, taking her as an entry point and analyzing her fluctuating Asian consciousness and Asian vision in the Cold War context not only constructs a broad discursive context for the entire book but also clarifies the book's basic analytical approach: using the literary life trajectories of diasporic individuals to explore the complexity of the cultural Cold War and the fluidity of identity, with textual aesthetic and formal analysis no longer the focus. When Zhang analyzes with sufficient patience and depth the complex fluidity of Han Suyin's writing discourse, he reveals a double mirror image of literature in relation to the Cold War. On the one hand, Han Suyin's writing expresses her anti-colonial mentality and liberal consciousness rooted in an Asian subjectivity, demonstrating the effectiveness and importance of literature as a Cold War weapon. On the other hand, the confusion and melancholy about her own identity that Han Suyin conveys in her writing reveals the instability of literature as an ideological vehicle—its direction always responding to the vicissitudes and crises of lived existence. And it is precisely this instability that constitutes the fundamental characteristic of Chinese-language (and Chinese) literature as seen through the researcher's lens.

In the other case studies in the book, Zhang also attends to this instability. Whether right-wing or left-wing, whether in Hong Kong or Malaya, whether leaving Southeast Asia or returning to China, the writer's journey and the trajectory of literature always overlap; a change in physical time and space also means a change in the literary life's track. Such is the fate of transnational diasporic writers, and such is the poetic characteristic of Chinese-language (and Chinese) literature—it is difficult to fix in form, nor does it need to be fixed, full of hesitant and

ambiguous tones and voices.

## **2. The Cold War as Method and the Political Dimension of Spiritual Poetics**

Beyond its forceful exploration of ideas, *The Cold War and the Literary Imagination in Asia* also seeks to break new ground methodologically. In addition to the researcher's customary skills of close reading, historical analysis, and theoretical engagement, a Cold War perspective based on political consciousness enters the research design as a method.

Taking the Cold War as method means recognizing the importance of historical period consciousness in the selection and integration of texts. That is, it is often the temporal position of a text—rather than its aesthetic qualities alone—that determines the researcher's choices and classifications. Consequently, cross-generic reading and cross-regional tracing become the basic approaches for integrating texts. In fact, when the researcher attempts to grasp Chinese-language (and Chinese) diasporic writers as a whole, their literary writing necessarily becomes a mirror of their diasporic journeys, or an accompanying phenomenon. Using texts to re-enter historical scenes and deeply touch their inner worlds, the researcher can sense the dialogue, collision, and consequences between their spiritual world and actual circumstances, thereby drawing clearer, more reasonable, and fuller conclusions. Thus, in this work, the author takes the Cold War as a method to conduct an in-depth analysis of diasporic writers' creative work, giving breath and countenance to a spiritual poetics that foregrounds the political dimension, and making case studies the optimal choice.

The ten writers covered in this book do not share a uniform attitude toward the Cold War. The difference between consciously engaging in the cultural Cold War and being unconsciously or reluctantly drawn into it is substantial and is necessarily reflected in their literary works. But in my view, literary works, as evidence of the complexity of human existence, are less a sharp tool for piercing the veil of history than a Cold War theater that presents historical wounds. Exploring the inner laws and goals of writing through the authenticity, severity, and mutability of historical context is certainly no easy task; and using literary imagination to refract the political creases of the spiritual world also requires a steady hand and a calm mind, as well as a broader historical vision and meticulous close reading. Zhang Songjian's book makes its most serious explorations precisely in this regard: the portrait and historical position of each writer are clearly discernible, each embodying a distinct problematic.

Take Jin Zhimang, for example. Zhang's study, building on previous scholarship, makes significant advances. Jin Zhimang is a left-wing writer virtually unknown in Chinese literary history, yet he shines brightly in the history of Mahua (Malaysian Chinese) literature. Through detailed facts and nuanced analysis, Zhang demonstrates that this man, who made meritorious contributions to the anti-British and anti-Japanese struggles in Malaya, also left a rich literary legacy for Mahua literature, and his position needs to be reassessed. At the same time, by

interpreting Jin's war novels published posthumously, Zhang sketches in subtle strokes Jin's spiritual journey: from a dashing combat hero to a minor political pawn in a new-style China. After years of turmoil, his writing was haunted by memories of revolution and war in Nanyang (Southeast Asia), while the real-world map of his homeland appeared dim and fragmented, leaving no trace. This reveals the aphasia experienced by diasporic individuals in real-world politics and the anguish of their mind-body split.

Taking the Cold War as a method to comprehensively assess each writer's oeuvre, Zhang portrays the responses and reflections of creators in different positions facing the currents of their time. The different facets of their creations present us with the complexity of literature in the Cold War context.

### **3. The Cold War Vision and the Expansion of Chinese-Language Literary Studies**

The Cold War vision extends and broadens literature's adhesions and related dimensions. The researcher must cross the barriers of a single language, embedding the displacements and reflections of individual lives into the interstices of literary history, and pondering the reach or limits of literary imagination. Thus, in this work, the literature in Zhang's pen is not confined by language or region but is closely connected to the existence of individuals within a context. Starting from systematic case studies of writers, he trudges through historical events and explores literary works, attempting to draw a spiritual portrait of a generation in the Cold War era.

Zhang's understanding of Han Suyin, precisely from the special vantage point of the connections between her literary creation and the multiple forces of the Cold War, transcends Chinese-language literary studies that are bound to specific languages and regions. Han Suyin had Chinese ancestry, and although her literary works were not written in Chinese, after being translated into Chinese they have received continuous responses from the Chinese literary studies community, becoming "Chinese-language literature" that crosses linguistic boundaries. In fact, Han Suyin, moving across different contexts, herself acted as a cross-cultural translator, enabling mutual observation and contact between different sides. Her literary creation is a powerful "credential" for this life journey. In Han Suyin's case, the relationship between "self" and "Chineseness" changes in substance and connotation with changes in time and space, defying any fixed characterization. "Chineseness" here is more like a unique cultural mechanism—a "mobile" perspective arising from individual vicissitudes and transitions, beyond fixed national imaginaries.

Proceeding from human existence, our study of Chinese-language literature must also fully attend to the methodological vision of "including the outside" proposed by David Der-wei Wang (David Der-wei Wang, 2006). It must traverse the literary territory of a single language and embrace creative experiences in non-Chinese languages that may seem external. If, in order to establish a Chinese-language poetics, we a priori eliminate the non-Chinese parts, we will only be looking for a lost sword by marking the boat—we will never be able to penetrate literary creation

that exists in multiple languages, cultures, and regional experiences. Researchers need to calmly reflect on how to temporarily set aside theoretical designs of categorization and integration, return to the life trajectories of individual creators, and understand the existential logic of creation itself. This is the inspiration that Zhang Songjian's in-depth case studies provide.

The link between the Cold War vision and literary writing also opens up the possibility of examining social issues through literature. Zhang's study thus embodies the possibility of "integrating diverse knowledges and moving toward interdisciplinary directions" (Suzuki Masahisa, 2024, p.4). As the scholar Suzuki Masahisa (2024) observes, the Asian Cold War concentrated issues such as ideology, democracy, nation-building movements, and decolonization, Professor Zhang Songjian, from an Asian perspective and through ten case studies, explores the complex and rich connotations of the Asian Cold War. This is not only "historical research" but also "holds enlightening significance for Asia's present and future". (Wang, Runhua, 2024, p.4).

### **Conclusion**

In *The Cold War and the Literary Imagination in Asia*, the author takes the Cold War as a context, embedding literature deep in history, and places the meaning of Chinese-language (and Chinese) literature into a complex problematic situation for inquiry and archaeology, thereby gaining an important starting point for innovative research. At the same time, the researcher takes the Cold War as a method, using cross-generic reading and cross-regional tracing as the basic approach for integrating texts, constructing a literary research field with a long durée and wide-angle lens, and exploring the possibility of integrating diverse knowledges and moving toward interdisciplinary research. Of course, in the Cold War vision, literary works are not only art but also manifestos of their time with a distinct political consciousness; they reflect and respond to the ripples of historical change, achieving an unprecedented historical status. Such research is undoubtedly an attempt to rewrite the history of Chinese-language literature. As Fredric Jameson (1981, p.17) argues, the political unconscious is an important perspective for understanding literature. Yet the distance and transformation between literary imagination and political engagement remain a theoretical or practical problem to be solved, and researchers must confront the complexity of this very problem.

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