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“Worlding” as Method:

A Review of Ji Jin’s *Worlding Contemporary Literature*

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Abstract: *Worlding Contemporary Literature* offers a theoretically informed and historically grounded study of overseas scholarship on contemporary Chinese literature. “Worlding” is not just a geographical concept, but a dynamic framework for understanding literary production, translation, and circulation. Within the broader context of world literature, Ji Jin explores how Chinese literature can be positioned within global literary discourse. By adopting “worlding” as a method, he highlights the theoretical vitality and interpretative potential of cross-cultural dialogue at epistemological and methodological levels. Against the backdrop of an increasingly complex contemporary literary landscape, the book examines the relationship between “Chineseness” and “cosmopolitanism”.

Keywords: worlding; Ji Jin; contemporary Chinese literature; Sinology

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标题: 作为方法的“世界中”——评季进教授《世界中的当代文学》

摘要: 《世界中的当代文学》以高度的理论自觉和历史意识系统阐释了海外中国当代文学研究的丰富性和启示性。“世界中”不仅是地理意义的空间区位，更是理解文学生产、译介和传播的动态参照。季进在全球世界文学的框架之下寻求中国文学与世界文学融合

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的路径，以“世界中”作为方法，充分释放出跨文化对话在认识论和方法论层面所蕴含的理论活力与阐释潜能，在复杂涌动、持续更新的当代文学共同体中，探讨“中国性”与“世界性”的复杂辩证。

关键词：世界中；季进；当代文学；海外汉学

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A review of the overseas circulation of contemporary Chinese literature over the past seventy years reveals significant changes in its agents, audiences, channels and scale. These changes raise many questions worthy of study. As Chinese literature becomes an increasingly important part of the global literary landscape, local writing continues to interact with global experience, and cross-cultural dialogue is reshaping the boundaries of this system. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (2010, pp. 261-262) notes that methods for mapping world literature have evolved in both temporal and spatial terms. The old “complementary model”—a one-dimensional framework that examined either the outward movement of national literature or the reception of foreign literature through translation and canonisation—can no longer fully explain the complex and multidirectional circulation of literature in a diverse global environment. In an era when established canons are being questioned and reconfigured, scholars reconsider the global significance of local works, new interpretations of national classics produced through canonisation and shifting patterns of world literature. These issues concern not only the relationship between contemporary Chinese literature and the world, but also the theoretical and methodological foundations of overseas Sinology. In this context, Ji Jin’s new work, *Worlding Contemporary Literature* (Yilin Press, 2025), makes a valuable contribution.

1. “Worlding” the Community of Chinese Literary Studies

The term “worlding” in the book’s title naturally recalls Martin Heidegger’s concept of “the world”. For Heidegger (1991, p. 176), the world is not a static object or container, but an open field in which meaning comes into presence; in his famous formulation, “the world worlds”. This understanding of world as process, rather than fixed space, has also shaped discussions of modern Chinese literature. Building on this line of thought, David Der-wei Wang (2021, p. 38) emphasises the interdependent relationship between modern China and the rest of the world. *A New Literary History of Modern China* situates Chinese literature and its interactive cultural forms within a complex and constantly evolving process of “worlding”. Overseas research on contemporary Chinese literature unfolds within this decentralised global network. Ji Jin therefore encourages readers to understand the community of contemporary Chinese literary studies through the lens of intertextuality. Academic communities in China and abroad do not simply share research materials, topics and theories; they also engage in mutual interpretation, exchange, and dialogue. The broader framework of “global literature” opens new possibilities for integrating Chinese literature into the canon of world literature. To understand the unique characteristics of contemporary Chinese literature, it is therefore important to balance local experience with broader global literary trends.

In his essay ‘Seeing through Different Perspectives’ (*Shicha zhijian*), Ji Jin first reviews the historical stages and intellectual contexts of overseas scholarship on contemporary Chinese literature. During the “politically dominated period” (1949-1965) and the “thematically focused period” (1966-1976), translation and research remained relatively limited, with literary studies often being subordinated to political and social enquiry due to the influence of Cold War paradigms. Nevertheless, this period saw the work of eminent scholars including Cyril Birch, Sicien H. Chen, C. T. Hsia and Tsi-an Hsia, Douwe W. Fokkema and Merle Goldman. Their studies explored the nature of literature and classical traditions, thereby outlining the fundamentals of contemporary Chinese literature. From the late 1970s to the end of the twentieth century, overseas scholarship on contemporary Chinese literature entered a “period of tracking changes and summarization”. As Reform and Opening-up accelerated, contemporary Chinese literature flourished and there was an increase in academic exchanges between China and the wider world. Overseas scholars gained a deeper understanding of China’s historical conditions and social realities, all the while keeping pace with the emergence of scar literature, avant-garde literature and modernist writing. At the same time, critical approaches such as gender studies, cultural studies, trauma theory and New Historicism brought new interpretative energy to literary studies, producing a more multidimensional understanding of the complexity of Chinese literature.

Since the turn of the century, overseas scholarship on contemporary Chinese literature has entered a “phase of pluralistic maturity”, yielding a remarkable breadth of research. (Ji Jin, 2025, pp. 271-275) This scholarship summarises, reviews and reflects on the development of contemporary literature, while also offering extensive discussions of writers and works spanning a variety of genres and styles. Within this growing body of research, the distinctive features of contemporary Chinese literature have gradually become clearer. In Anglophone academia, for instance, scholarly attention has shifted from established authors to a younger generation of writers. The scope of literary analysis has also broadened to encompass genre writing, including science fiction and online literature. At the same time, numerous literary histories, research guides and handbooks on contemporary Chinese literature have been published, collectively advancing the construction and circulation of its global image.

Through a diachronic review of the field’s development, Ji Jin identifies significant differences between Chinese and overseas scholarship on contemporary literature at ontological and epistemological levels. In terms of research materials, Chinese and overseas scholars often differ in their selection and evaluation of literary texts and related sources. These divergences arise not only from objective constraints, such as limited access to materials, but also from differences in academic conventions and individual scholarly preferences. Corresponding to these disparities in source materials is a “disparity in conceptions”—that is, differences in the interpretation and evaluation of literary phenomena and works by Chinese and overseas scholars. The definition of genres such as poetry, prose and fiction according to either Western literary categories or traditional Chinese classifications reflects the ongoing negotiation of subjectivity in cross-cultural exchange. Meanwhile, debates over evaluative criteria often reveal tensions between different academic positions and value systems. These tensions can manifest as the over-privileging of specific historical periods, literary styles

or social groups, or the adoption of preconceived critical positions that overlook essential issues in favour of secondary concerns.

In order to address the “mismatches” between concepts, materials, methods and values, Ji Jin clarifies four key categories at the ontological level of overseas research into contemporary Chinese literature: “Chineseness”, “contemporaneity”, “literariness” and “global context”. In the context of globalisation, the traditional research model, which is centred on the nation-state and grounded in local historical development and geopolitical experience, has become increasingly inadequate for understanding transnational cultural flows and interactions. (Ji Jin, 2025, p. 308) The globalisation of contemporary Chinese literature involves more than just international shifts in subject matter, literary techniques, value orientations, or target readerships. More profoundly, it situates the processes of canon formation, historicisation, and academic study within a broader global context. Researchers face challenges and opportunities in defining and articulating “Chineseness” in contemporary narratives, understanding the relationship between “literariness” and “commercialization” amidst changing reading habits and media environments, and engaging with lived reality through literary methods in a rapidly changing world. In Ji Jin’s view, positioning contemporary Chinese literature within world literature requires more than attention to local experience and stylistic features. It also demands sustained reflection on the relationship between contemporary Chinese literature and world literature through methodological awareness, academic exchange, and cross-cultural practice.

2. Transcultural Dialogue from an Ethical Perspective

To understand the translation of contemporary Chinese literature around the “world”, it is necessary to recognise the complexity of its overseas circulation. Existing scholarship generally follows three main approaches: historical analysis (or “historical observation”), statistical analysis (or “quantitative analysis”), and interpretative inquiry (or “qualitative research”). While these approaches differ in emphasis, they also overlap significantly. (Ji Jin, 2025, pp. 293-295)

“Historical observation” seeks to either provide a broad account of the circulation of contemporary Chinese literature or offer detailed case studies. Such research may trace the origins of translations by outlining the major stages and historical contexts of their production, circulation, and reception. It may also draw on translation theory to evaluate the strengths, limitations and practical effects of translation and circulation. However, this approach is limited by its reliance on a fixed opposition between the “domestic” and the “overseas”, which tends to overlook the fluidity of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural practice. Furthermore, while it pays considerable attention to translation, it pays comparatively less attention to other dimensions, such as readership, distribution, research and adaptation. By contrast, “quantitative analysis” places greater emphasis on data and objectivity. Yet, in data collection and statistical evaluation, it often focuses too heavily on novels as the dominant genre of circulation while paying insufficient attention to essays, poetry, drama and other literary forms. (Lei Yanni, Wu Hao, 2025, pp. 183-193) Furthermore, data collection is sometimes overly generalised, random, contingent or narrow in scope. Without rigorous statistical standards or adequate attention to algorithmic ethics, selected samples often fail to reflect the broader picture of contemporary

literary circulation. Compared with the previous two approaches, “qualitative research” is better suited to individual cases. It allows for a closer examination of issues such as variation, domestication and adaptation within the translation process. However, some of the circulation strategies and practical proposals put forward within this framework are still not sufficiently grounded in practice. At the same time, there is still relatively little structural reflection on the institutional mechanisms and power relations that shape cross-cultural communication.

According to Ji Jin, existing research on the circulation of contemporary Chinese literature overseas suffers from three major imbalances. Researchers tend to emphasise direct influence while paying insufficient attention to structural transformation. They focus heavily on the export of literary works while overlooking the responses of receiving audiences. Finally, they privilege visible effects while neglecting the subtle processes through which such influence is produced and negotiated. (Ji Jin, 2025, p. 297) In reality, the overseas translation and circulation of contemporary Chinese literature is not just a matter for communication studies, but “a comprehensive and complex cultural project”. To deepen and refine relevant scholarship, it is therefore necessary to establish a dynamic, multilayered, and holistic analytical framework. Only by incorporating multiple perspectives, including the publishing market, readership, communication media and world literature, can scholars develop a coherent view of contemporary Chinese literature in global circulation. Such an approach enables us to move beyond the limitation of ‘seeing the trees but not the forest’ and, based on a shared sense of academic community, delineate the overall landscape of contemporary Chinese literature overseas more clearly.

Contemporary literature “in the world” should therefore be understood as both an extension of the discipline of contemporary Chinese literature and a means of engaging with broader literary questions, including world literature and comparative literature. Consequently, theoretical dialogue between national literature and world literature is of particular importance. Including diverse cultural voices in the study of contemporary Chinese literature can deepen our understanding of Western academic traditions, aesthetic sensibilities, value systems and research ethics. As Qian Zhongshu (1986, p. 330) metaphorically observes: “It is as if one were to eat fish and meat; these should be fully assimilated into one’s bodily fluids so that foreign substances become one with oneself, nourishing the flesh and replenishing vital energy. Their distinct functions combine to produce a unified effect.” Conversely, this dialogue also enables us to recognise more clearly the significance of the aesthetic characteristics, discursive systems and narrative ethics of Chinese literature more clearly within the broader context of the “world”.

Drawing on this reciprocal interaction, the place of contemporary Chinese literature within world literature can be reconsidered. Globalisation involves cultural exchange and a transformation in modes of thought. To understand the broader connections within human culture, one has to move beyond narrow local perspectives and recognize the coexistence of cross-cultural diversity and simultaneity. Cultural contexts, whether local or regional, possess both universal and particular qualities; there is no need to privilege one at the expense of the other, nor should one undervalue their own position. As Ji Jin argues, we should “seek unity amidst contradictions and recognise differences within unity” (2025, pp. 331-332). The formation of an

overseas scholarly community for the study of Chinese literature therefore hinges on comparative analysis and critical negotiation of multiple discourses. Building on Nie Zhenzhao's concept of "literary ethics", Ji Jin elevates the humanistic values of cross-cultural engagement, such as equality, inclusivity and sincerity, to the level of "cross-cultural ethics". (Ji Jin, 2025, p. 309)

Unlike literary ethics, which focuses on the moral values and normative principles embedded in literary works, cross-cultural ethics shifts the focus from the ethical issues themselves to the effects produced through intercultural interaction. The aim is to move beyond isolated perspectives while maintaining openness and inclusivity in communication. Consequently, the ability to initiate and maintain dialogue is central to cross-cultural ethics. At a scholarly level, this ethical framework requires a careful and reflective approach to academic dialogue rather than arbitrarily marginalising dissenting voices through rigid binary judgements. For a long time, the tendency of some Western theoretical frameworks to force Chinese texts into ill-fitting interpretative models—the so-called 'square peg in a round hole' approach—has frequently been criticised within overseas Sinology. However, Ji Jin encourages us to avoid polarised thinking and recognise the value of overseas scholarship in revealing, supplementing and reinterpreting aspects of local texts that might otherwise go unnoticed.

In contrast, cross-cultural ethics in translation are governed by more explicit normative principles. Citing Antoine Berman, Ji Jin emphasises the inherently open nature of translation practice, arguing that "displacement", "hybridization", and "recoding" are unavoidable dimensions of cross-cultural dialogue. However, one has to remain vigilant against translators such as Evan King, who translated Lao She's *Rickshaw Boy*. His "ethnocentric" approach may distort or misappropriate Chinese literary works. Conversely, other translators, such as David Wakefield, Nicky Harman and Howard Goldblatt, strike a careful balance between readability and precision by developing "localization" strategies that remain faithful to the original text. In short, translation practice requires a careful negotiation between difference and assimilation. This enables Chinese stories to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries and enter the world literary sphere.

In his essay, '*On Overseas Sinology and the Construction of an Academic Community*', Ji Jin proposed the idea of establishing an "academic community" based on shared academic principles, research subjects, and theoretical interests. (Ji Jin, 2015, pp. 59-65) The international scholarly community engaged in the study of contemporary Chinese literature relies on an open intellectual outlook, continually refining cognitive and critical standards, and engaging in sustained dialogue between Eastern and Western discursive traditions. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas's concept of "communicative rationality", he argues that different modes of expression should be given space for dialogue so that mutual understanding can be fostered and deepened. Cross-cultural ethics thus provides an essential foundation for the coexistence of diverse forms of expression. Adopting this perspective enables one to better understand different viewpoints, absorb diverse experiences generated "in the world", refine one's knowledge structures, and renew one's cultural concepts, ensuring that the voice of contemporary Chinese literature is "truly conveyed and truly heard".

3. “Worlding” as a Methodological Practice

Understanding overseas scholarship on contemporary Chinese literature from a historical perspective is a complex task. In an increasingly interconnected global context, one of the major challenges for scholars of overseas Chinese studies is identifying and addressing the differences and conflicts that emerge through cross-cultural exchange. (Wu Yingcheng, Zhang Lianqiao, 2025, pp. 1-8) Ji Jin argues that contemporary literature “in the world” can be examined across four interrelated dimensions: texts, disciplines, methodologies, and institutional mechanisms. At the textual level, this involves maintaining the focus on editions, textual scholarship and bibliography that has long characterised modern literary studies. This requires the systematic collection and organisation of diverse materials circulated overseas. In addition to printed texts, such work also encompasses oral histories, fieldwork materials, and digital archival resources. In terms of disciplinary development, reflection on the knowledge systems, historical evolution, intellectual positions, scholarly perspectives and representative achievements of overseas research on contemporary Chinese literature moves beyond the narrow framework of translation studies. Instead, these issues enter emerging fields within the broader discipline of contemporary literary studies. Methodologically, this approach critically examines how overseas scholarship has shaped domestic research paradigms and modes of literary production. By identifying differences and turning the analytical lens back upon oneself— “using one’s own reflections to examine oneself, and projecting one’s own perspectives to understand others”—it becomes possible to foster a more meaningful dialogue between contemporary Chinese literature and world literature.

Since 2017, Ji Jin’s research team has traced the overseas circulation of modern and contemporary Chinese literature by compiling extensive bibliographical records. This project provides a substantial philological basis for acknowledging the contributions and significance of this body of work, while also critically reflecting on its limitations. The records include English translations of literary works spanning various genres, such as fiction, poetry, drama and prose, as well as scholarly studies of modern and contemporary Chinese literature. Organised as encyclopaedic entries, the project offers concise summaries of major scholarly works from different historical periods, outlining their development and tracing their intellectual origins. It also assesses their academic impact. In doing so, it reconstructs the intellectual history of overseas scholarship on modern Chinese literature. It also provides detailed introductions to individual translations, carefully documenting publication information, the selection of texts included, the backgrounds of translators, and the academic reception of each translation. By systematically presenting the circulation of modern Chinese literature in the English-speaking world, the project sheds light on the achievements and the lessons it offers for future research.

Compiling this catalogue provides a solid foundation for keyword-based research in overseas studies of contemporary Chinese literature. According to Raymond Williams, vocabulary reflects both the historical development and the present conditions of culture and social life. The study of keywords is therefore relational and open-ended. As Ji Jin observes, “the essence of keywords is not fixation, but openness to new discursive systems and possibilities.” (Ji Jin, 2025, p. 341) Tracing scholarly developments through keywords enables

researchers to adopt multiple perspectives on overseas Sinology and to examine the relationship between Chinese literature and world literature more concretely. David Damrosch views world literature as a mode of refraction and circulation, whereas Karen Laura Thornber uses the metaphor of a nebula of literary encounters to emphasise the global nature of literary subjects within world literature. From this perspective, the scholarly community surrounding contemporary Chinese literature is a space shaped by categories such as history, fiction, ethnicity, nation, gender, subjectivity, emotion, everyday life, diaspora, sovereignty and hegemony. It is also a place where different discourses converge through conflict, dialogue, fusion, and coexistence.

Examining the evolution of keywords at the theoretical level, as well as their projection within broader sociocultural contexts, is a form of intellectual archaeology. Such an inquiry recognises the many differences within a larger historical whole and reconstructs the contexts in which contemporary Chinese literature has been circulated and studied. Moreover, using keywords as entry points for cross-cultural and interdisciplinary dialogue creates new interpretative possibilities. This helps bridge the temporal and spatial boundaries between different fields of study, fostering what Byung-Chul Han terms a “trans-culture” through overlap and coexistence. In this way, keyword-based research opens up new avenues for the development of overseas scholarship on Chinese literature. For Ji Jin, Chinese literature has always been part of a dynamic process of “globalization”, rather than passively awaiting incorporation into an established system of world literature. His own scholarly work provides strong evidence for this argument.

Conclusion

Worlding Contemporary Literature offers a clear and substantial account of overseas scholarship on contemporary Chinese literature, combining theoretical awareness with historical depth. From the perspectives of ontology, epistemology and methodology, the book asks whether, and if so how, contemporary Chinese literature can enter the canon of world literature. The place of national literature within the changing power relations of world literature remains an enduring question. Under globalisation, however, cultural exchange and cultural tension have turned this question into a shared challenge for writers, translators and scholars.

The methodological perspective of “worlding” highlights the theoretical vitality and interpretative potential of cross-cultural dialogue. Adopting a broad global perspective, Ji Jin advocates an academic ethic grounded in dialogue, coexistence and pluralistic negotiation, thereby “opening gates and transforming boundaries”. The book thus offers an important foundation for understanding contemporary Chinese literature as a field rooted in local experience while meaningfully engaging with the broader currents of world literature.

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