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Rewriting the History of Chinese Literature from a world literary perspective: The Revelatory Significance of Zhang Longxi's *A History of Chinese Literature*

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Abstract: This article provides a critique of Professor Zhang Longxi's *A History of Chinese Literature*. As the first comprehensive history of Chinese literature written in English by a Chinese scholar for general readers, this work stands out among literary histories with its lucid flowing style, encyclopedic content, and a scholarly vision that intertwines Chinese and Western perspectives. The article explores the theoretical core and practical orientation of the concept of world literature, its adherence to the ontology of "literariness," and the two-way activation between translation and classics. It aims to reveal the significant value of the book in understanding Chinese literature and its place within world culture.

Key Words: Zhang Longxi; *A History of Chinese Literature*; world literature perspective

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标题: 以世界文学视野重写中国文学史——张隆溪《中国文学史》的启示意义

摘要: 本文对张隆溪教授的《中国文学史》进行评析。该书作为首部中国学者用英文撰写的面向非专业读者的中国文学通史，以其清通的文风、详赡的内容以及错综中西的学术视野，在众多文学史著作中脱颖而出。文章从世界文学观的理论内核与实践指向、

“文学性”本体论的坚守以及翻译与经典的双向激活等方面展开探讨，旨在揭示该书对于理解中国文学及其在世界文化中地位的重要价值。

关键词：张隆溪；《中国文学史》；世界文学视野

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In 2023, Routledge published *A History of Chinese Literature* by Zhang Longxi, the first comprehensive account of Chinese literary history written in English by a Chinese scholar; a Chinese translation appeared in 2024. After decades of fostering dialogue between China and the West, Zhang argues that Chinese literature must become an aesthetically perceptible presence for global readers through high-quality translation and interpretation. His book enacts this conviction: “to re-read the canonical masterpieces of Chinese literature from an international perspective and display their distinctive appeal to the world.” It is at once a response to Goethe’s ideal of “world literature” and a sustained inquiry into how Chinese literature can meaningfully “go out.”

1. Reconfiguring the Concept of World Literature

When Goethe coined the term “world literature” in the nineteenth century, the concept was soon reduced to European letters under the twin pressures of Western colonial expansion and Eurocentric scholarship, drifting far from its original universal intent. In the twenty-first century David Damrosch redefined the field, insisting that a work becomes world literature only when it circulates beyond the culture and language in which it was produced. Building on this insight, Zhang Longxi argues that world literature must embrace the major traditions of both the West and the non-West, envisaging a horizontal traffic of equals rather than a one-way export of metropolitan canons. The limitations of the old paradigm, he contends, have become acutely visible in the age of globalization, and a more inclusive architecture is urgently needed—a claim that has reopened debate on the very constitution of world literature. Zhang’s global vision shapes the design of his *History of Chinese Literature*: by writing in English, the scholarly lingua franca, he seeks to insert Chinese letters into the world republic of letters and to secure canonical Chinese texts a permanent place within world literature.

This stance shapes the historiographic protocol of his *History*: deploying English—the global lingua franca—to insert Chinese literature into world literary space, he shifts the discipline from “being spoken about” to “self-articulation.” For example, the Tang “Ancient Prose Movement” is no longer framed as a Chinese Renaissance but explicated through Han Yu’s dictum “literature is the vehicle of the Way” and Liu Zongyuan’s *Eight Records of Yongzhou*, thereby constructing an immanent logic of “parallel-prose versus loose-prose—revival of ancient prose.”

In its authorial strategy, the work deliberately dismantles the Western stereotype that equates ancient

China with a stagnant Oriental spectacle; it reconstructs, without rupture, the three-thousand-year literary continuum that extends from the pre-Qin Classic of Poetry to Lu Xun's modern fiction, foregrounding the immanent logic whereby Wei-Jin xuanxue philosophically grounded Tang poetry and Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism conceptually molded dramatic narrative. Spatially, it situates Chinese literature within a framework of parallel dialogue with extra-territorial literatures, so that the narration of China's literary development simultaneously foregrounds its interactive relations with other national literatures. When discussing Tang literature, for example, it registers the Western Regions cultural element encoded in Li Bai's image of "the Hu bar-girl in the tavern." "In Tang poetry and other literary forms, for example, a 'green-eyed foreign monk' and other non-Chinese figures often appear, and their different customs and lifestyles, their music and dance, and their cultural traits left marks on the open and inclusive Chinese culture, added to its colors, and enriched it." (Zhang, Longxi, 2023, p.95) Moreover, *the History of Chinese Literature* cites the literary exchange centering on the Japanese Kentōshi envoy Abe no Nakamaro (Chao Heng) to demonstrate Chinese literature's radiating and inclusive power as a civilizational hub. This mode of writing is a vivid enactment of a world-literature outlook, allowing Chinese literature to unfold its distinctive appeal within a global horizon.

The practical significance of this world-literature approach is twofold: it furnishes Chinese literature with a new grammar for global dialogue—exemplified by the cross-cultural conversation between Dao and logos that reconfigures philosophical discourse—and it offers the writing of world literary history a model of "multiple centers." In the section on Yuan drama, for instance, the study traces how the translation of *The Orphan of Zhao* by the French Jesuit Joseph Prémare shaped Voltaire's *L'Orphelin de la Chine* and subsequently entered Enlightenment debates on "reason versus despotism." This reception-historical lens not only documents Chinese literature's tangible impact on Europe but also exposes the mechanism of creative transformation inherent in civilizational dialogue: Voltaire's rewriting converts the original theme of loyalty and martyrdom into an Enlightenment narrative of "reason triumphing over violence," a process that itself constitutes the dynamic evolution of world literature.

2. Ontological Commitment to "Literariness"

In the English preface Zhang declares:

In writing this book, therefore, I have tried to explain the historical background where relevant and necessary, but this is a literary history, not a social or political history making use of literary texts as corroborative evidence. The focus of this book is literature, the expression of ideas and feelings in an artistic language that makes it possible for the reader to share the immediacy of experience, empathetically enter the fictional world of the literary text, and vicariously feel what the protagonists experience in that situation with

imagination and emotional involvement. (Zhang Longxi, 2023, Preface xv.)

This work's ontological construction of "litericity" is, in essence, a modern transmutation of the classical Chinese poetics encoded in "poetry voices the mind" and "poetry arises from feeling." In its discussion of the Book of Songs "Gathering Vetch": "In the past, on the day I left, Poplars and willows danced in the wind", it reads the imagistic collision of "willow" and "snow-rain" as a spatio-temporal pairing of natural scenes that bears the soldier's psychological tension of "joyful landscape, mournful heart." This technique of "writing feeling through scene, feeling lodged within scene" becomes the fountainhead of Chinese literature's aesthetic paradigm of fused scene-and-emotion, whose litericity transcends any specific historical context.

Rejecting the reductive tendency to turn literary history into an ideological loudspeaker, the study insists on literature's own aesthetic autonomy. In its treatment of Song-dynasty writing, it acknowledges Wang Anshi's reforms as a catalyst for literary renovation, yet trains its lens on Su Shi's "Prose-poem on Red Cliff," where the cosmos is declared "inexhaustible for both things and me," disclosing an eternal aesthetic value that transcends any concrete political moment. Turning to the Tang New Yuefu movement, the book does not rest at the stock verdict of "reflecting the people's misery," but drills into the micro-tension in Bai Juyi's "Old Charcoal Seller": "Pitiful—his coat is thin; anxious that charcoal fetch too low a price, he prays the weather stay cold." The paradox of "thin coat" versus "wishing for cold" opens a unique excavation of human complexity. Even within the movement's political context, the story argues, the critical force of "Old Charcoal Seller" springs from the text's detail-driven tension rather than from ideology. Bai Juyi's claim to immortality lies, finally, in his artistic capacity to make "writing answer the needs of its moment," not in serving as a megaphone for policy.

Likewise, in its reading of the canonical novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the study zeroes in on the philosophical metaphor and narrative architecture of the "Land of Illusion," disclosing the text's ultimate meditation on qing (affect), yu (desire), and kong (emptiness) rather than restricting itself to an external account of the decline of an aristocratic clan. Such a mode of writing tacitly aligns itself with a scholarly orientation that reconstructs the historical picture according to literature's own internal laws.

3. The reciprocal activation of "translation" and "canon"

Zhang Longxi openly acknowledges that his selection of authors and texts follows the canonical templates of domestic textbooks, yet he simultaneously argues that prevailing Chinese literary histories remain trapped in a bifurcated schema that mechanically separates "ideological content" from "artistic features." Mindful of the epistemic formation and reading protocols of an international audience, his study foregrounds the aesthetic explication of canonical works and drastically scales back the exhaustive, socio-historical contextualization that characterizes conventional compendia. In doing so, it not only foregrounds the distinctive appeal of

Chinese literature but also satisfies the interpretive expectations of global readers, thereby offering an emulable paradigm for the ongoing rewriting of Chinese literary history.

In response to de-centering impulses in Western academe (Columbia, Cambridge histories), Zhang defends the canon as the precipitate of temporal aesthetic selection. Tao Qian becomes a test case for trans-regional universality. Throughout, translation is conceived as creative transformation: the rendering of Guan ju preserves alliterative and reduplicative music; the prophecy “each bird returns to its own wood” in *Dream* is re-accented through iambic cadence to evoke Buddhist *śūnyatā*. Such strategy negotiates an aesthetic common denominator across linguistic divides.

Throughout the composition process, the author remains acutely attentive to the cultural reception habits of anglophone readers while resisting the temptation to graft Western theoretical templates onto Chinese texts. Confronted with the cultural aphasia often suffered by non-Western literatures in the face of linguistic barriers, Zhang Longxi advances translation as a modality of creative transformation. Abandoning the mechanical equivalence of word-for-word rendering, he prioritizes the transposition of acoustic rhythm and cultural metaphor embedded in the source. In his English version of “Guan ju” from the *Classic of Poetry*, for instance, the alliterative and reduplicative musicality is deliberately preserved, satisfying the anglophone ear yet retaining the affective function of the original *bi-xing* figuration. Likewise, the prophetic line “Each bird returns to its own wood” in *Dream of the Red Chamber* is re-inflected through an iambic cadence that mimics the philosophical pulse of the Chinese, conjuring the Buddhist *śūnyatā* evoked by “a boundless expanse of white purity.” Such a strategy is not domestication in any simplistic sense, but rather a calibrated search for aesthetic common denominators across linguistic difference.

Simultaneously, the work displays a sustained methodological self-awareness of cross-cultural comparison. In its interpretations of Chinese literary texts, it recurrently imports Western literary theories and cultural concepts for comparative analysis. For instance, it juxtaposes the *Classic of Poetry*’s dictum “poetry articulates the intent” with the Western exploration of human nature, thereby underscoring the universality of literature as the expression of human emotion and thought. Drawing on Schiller’s polarity of “naïve poetry” versus “sentimental poetry,” it elucidates the distinction between Tang and Song poetry: “We are almost tempted to think of Tang and Song as the naïve and the sentimental in poetry as Friedrich Schiller famously proposed, but the continuity of the two is of course as important as their differences.” (Zhang Longxi, 2023, p.191) This strategy enables Western readers to apprehend the evolution of Chinese literature with heightened immediacy. When discussing Yuan drama, the study interprets the climactic moment in Guan Hanqing’s *Injustice to Dou E*—“her blood spurts onto the white silk”—a spectacle that readily evokes the Gothic trope of blood as a symbol of redemption. Dou E’s dying oath in fact embodies the traditional notion of Heaven–human resonance: by offering her individual life as a sacrificial pledge, she compels the transcendent “Heaven” to become witness to earthly justice. The analysis thus foregrounds the aesthetic

articulations of the demand for justice across divergent civilizations, revealing a trans-cultural resonance of shared human concerns.

When explicating Yuan drama, the analysis of Guan Hanqing's *Injustice to Dou E* highlights the stage image of "blood spattering white silk," an instant that readily evokes the Gothic trope of blood-as-redemption. Yet the author re-anchors the moment within the indigenous cosmology of *tian-ren gan-ying* (Heaven-human resonance): Dou E's self-sacrifice coerces the transcendent Tian to bear witness to earthly injustice, thereby foregrounding divergent civilizational imaginaries of justice while simultaneously revealing a shared aesthetic concern with moral legibility.

The reading of *The Peony Pavilion* similarly isolates Du Liniang's narrative arc—qing arises, qing dies, qing is resurrected—and sets it beside *Romeo and Juliet*'s fantasy of love transcending death. The comparison distills a trans-cultural topos of emotion contesting rational restraint. Tang Xianzu's aesthetic construction of *qing-zhi* (the ultimate reach of qing) endows individual emotion with ontological priority over feudal *li* (ritual propriety), a philosophical gesture that resonates diachronically with Western Romanticism yet retains the distinctively Chinese synthesis of qing (emotion) and li (principle). Such cross-cultural hermeneutics not only deepens the understanding of Chinese literature but also furnishes a replicable methodological horizon for literary studies conducted across disparate cultural archives.

4. Conclusion

Two centuries after Goethe's prophecy, Zhang demonstrates that Chinese literature has never been absent from the world; it awaits appropriate modalities of "discovery" grounded in profound self-recognition and genuine respect for plurality. Ferrying Chinese letters across linguistic and cultural oceans, *A History of Chinese Literature* eschews both self-Orientalization and cultural nationalism, marking a disciplinary shift from reactive response to proactive construction. It offers a "Chinese proposal" for global dialogue: literature as medium to locate shared human luminosity within difference. When Li Bai's romanticism, Du Fu's gravity, and Cao Xueqin's compassion become aesthetically perceptible and emotionally resonant for world readers through precise translation and penetrating interpretation, Chinese literature accomplishes its creative leap from the "national" to the "world." A genuine world literary history should be cognitive resonance among civilizations effected through literature; Zhang's volume, rigorous yet dialogic, furnishes a living paradigm for such resonance and secures for Chinese literature a dignified position on the world map—not a periphery gazing at the center, but one of myriad rivers equally converging toward the sea.

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