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## Book Reviews



Zhu Shoutong. *New Literature in Chinese: China and the World*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2016. 285 pp.

In the past decade, the study of modern Sinitic-language literature has become an exciting academic field. Sinophone studies focus on the power of the sound and script articulations of marginal and supranational communities upon dominant cultures and nation-states.<sup>1</sup>

Zhu Shoutong's *New Literature in Chinese: China and the World* reflects this scholarly trend. The book does not approach the subject from a Sinophone or postcolonial perspective but is more comfortably situated within the traditional discipline of modern Chinese literature as developed in mainland China and Macao. The book's title manifests the author's intent: to replace the common name of the discipline of "modern Chinese literature" with a new name, "new literature in Chinese." This nominal change serves to highlight cultural connections and exchanges between China and the world.

Although the proposed name of the discipline "new literature in Chinese" shows a conceptual emphasis on Chinese language as the defining criterion for modern Chinese literature, the corresponding Chinese term remains unclear to the reader. This is because the term "Chinese" as it relates to language can be translated variously as *zhongwen* 中文, *huayu* 華語, or *hanyu* 漢語, to name just a few possibilities. Further, the meaning of Chinese language has been subject to scholarly debates. "Chinese" is a broad modifier that could refer to what we now call Mandarin Chinese (i.e., Han dialect), Sinitic languages as a whole, classical language, vernacular language, and different scripts and dialects.<sup>2</sup>

1 See Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Jing Tsu, *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard East Asia, 2010).

2 On Chinese language, see W.C. Hannas, *Asia's Orthographic Dilemma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 3-7.

The overarching goal of the book is not an exploration of the ways in which the dynamics of Chinese language shaped Chinese literature but, rather, a discussion of the “novelty” of modern Chinese literature. This corresponds to the actions of Chinese intellectuals, who, in the early twentieth century, labeled modern Chinese literature “new literature” [*xin wenxue* 新文學]. It is in this context that the author seeks to expand the conceptual framework of Chinese to incorporate the present-day realities of globalization, immigration, and the movement of people and ideas across geopolitical borders.

Zhu emphasizes “cultural belongingness” among overseas Chinese writers, yet this concept limits the flexibility of the immigrant subjects, as an external cultural force that separates them from the cultural center of the new nation, continent, or culture in which they settle. Zhu’s emphasis on cultural belongingness reinforces Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini’s argument in *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*:<sup>3</sup> that transnationalism may exacerbate the exploitation of labor in oppressive nation-states.

Zhu also points out that “new literature in Chinese” will “not weaken China’s core status in world Chinese culture, rather it will strengthen it” (p. 52). This is because the authors “seek authoritative approval from mainland China, which is where the Chinese cultural belongingness is attached” (p. 56). Elsewhere, the author somewhat contradictorily states that the separation of Chinese literature from the geopolitical constraints of the nation-state “avoids sensitive political complications” (p. 45). One cannot help wondering why authors need to seek “authoritative approval” and whether it is possible to separate Chinese literature entirely from politics. If we consider cultural belongingness a centrifugal or unifying force that reflects a certain authority of Chinese culture, would this not render the outlook of modern and contemporary Chinese literature homogeneous and monotonous?

Chapter 1, “New Literature in Chinese,” explores the institutionalization of the discipline of modern and contemporary Chinese literature. Zhu points out the long-term confusion and inadequacy of various names and concepts employed to designate the discipline, which include “modern Chinese literature,” “literature in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao,” and “overseas Chinese literature.” The term “new literature in Chinese” integrates various areas of the discipline into an organic whole because it is “based on the linguistic facts of literary creation,” “delimits the boundaries of New Literature,” and

3 Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini, ed., *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 1996).

“self-evidently” reveals its connections with and differences from Old Literature in the larger field of Chinese literature (p. 8).

Zhu also discusses Western literary theory on the importance of language to support his proposition that Chinese literature should be defined from the perspective of Chinese language. For Zhu, it is unnecessary to discuss the ideological, political, or national factors in literature when conducting literary research. For instance, Zhu understands that Durisin’s theory of “inter-literariness” stresses the importance of language and culture. Further extending this view, Zhu argues that “language is part of social existence and it best represents the culture of a nation and the culture itself” (p. 14). This statement is reminiscent of Benedict Anderson’s concept of the “imagined communities” based on a common language within the nation.<sup>4</sup> But Zhu addresses the issue from the perspective of literary studies.

In fact, Zhu is sensitive to the cultural and linguistic diversity present in Chinese literature. It is precisely his sharp awareness of the cultural value of diasporic Chinese writers that informs his call for change in the discipline, which, he avers, has been defined strictly “according to political territories” (p. 59). “From a legal perspective, there is nothing wrong with addressing diasporic Chinese writers as overseas writers.... However, from the perspective of cultural ethics, the issue is not that simple” (p. 59). Zhu captures the political complication of the term “overseas writers,” which at once marks overseas writers as less significant than the mainland Chinese writers and strategically fixes the identity of overseas writers as *Chinese* writers. Although scholars in Sinophone studies seek to refute the notion of a “diaspora” to resist the discourse of the nation-state,<sup>5</sup> Zhu addresses the urgency of acknowledging the cultural significance of overseas Chinese literature in the larger discipline of modern Chinese literature.

Chapter 2, “China and Its New Literature,” discusses the relationship between modern and contemporary Chinese literature and environment, geography, and science. Zhu’s advocacy of cultural belongingness is manifested through his identification of “national culture” with China’s traditional culture and literature. Zhu argues that the May Fourth writers’ ignorance of the literary legacy of traditional Chinese literature inevitably weakened “New Literature’s” “literariness.” “This means it abandoned its own inherent advantages in the world literature and so eventually lost its qualification to hold a dialogue with

4 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

5 See Shu-mei Shih, “The Concept of the Sinophone,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 126, no. 3 (2011), 709.

the world literature" (p. 84). One page later, Zhu antithetically claims that the May Fourth writers' literary revolution represents a changing way of thinking about the world. Traditional Chinese literature, according to Zhu, in a way similar to Dante's *Divine Comedy*,<sup>6</sup> has a tendency to envision a "vertical" religious world order that contains heaven and hell. The modern worldview, however, is "horizontal." This "global" paradigm "expands our horizon to every corner of the globe, enabling us to make synchronical comparison and critical examination" (p. 100). Zhu assumes that the fundamental religious differences between China and the West at large in the premodern era prevented comparative studies. This argument requires significant revision in view of Anthony Yu's *Comparative Journeys: Essays on Literature and Religion East and West*.<sup>7</sup>

Further, in his discussion of the fundamental conflict between literature and science, Zhu points out that the advocacy of science, psychological methods in particular, had largely undermined the "emotional and humane beauty" exemplified in the characters portrayed by the May Fourth authors (p. 132). This conclusion clearly echoes Lu Xun's 鲁迅 prioritization of a nation's ethos or spirituality over material reality. At the same time, Zhu overemphasizes the discourse of the May Fourth literary canon when talking about the "tragic historical fate of science in the New Literature" (p. 136). Recent scholarship has begun to look at the discourse of Chinese science fiction in the early twentieth century from the perspective of colonialism and Orientalism.<sup>8</sup>

Zhu's analyses consistently points to the unresolved tension between traditional literature and modern culture, but it remains unclear what place his advocacy of cultural belongingness occupies in his critique of modern and contemporary literature. This ambiguous stance is also reflected in the methodology of his analysis. In his discussion of contemporary Chinese short stories written by Tie Ning 鐵凝, Fang Fang 方方, Zhao Mei 趙玫, and others in the last section of Chapter 2, Zhu writes that "flaunting the meaning" excessively tends to turn a story into an allegory. Such rhetoric, if overemphasized, will result in the loss of the "aesthetic pleasure" of the story. The reader requires a more specific, and indeed, scientific analysis of the "aesthetics" of the story. The method of narratology, as discussed in Lydia Liu's *Translingual Practice:*

6 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* (Auckland: Signature Press, 2007).

7 Anthony Yu, *Comparative Journeys: Essays on Literature and Religion East and West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

8 See Nathaniel Isaacson, *Celestial Empire: The Emergence of Chinese Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017).

*Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity*<sup>9</sup> may be one such “scientific” means of analyzing the stories.

Chapter 3, “New Literature and New Media in Chinese,” contains Zhu’s critique of modern Chinese drama. He proposes that “modern playwrights have little self-awareness, passion or creative ideas on the nature of drama, which leads to a lack of clear classical construction of concept in the development of new drama in Chinese” (p. 153). The author claims that what the May Fourth writers criticized most about traditional opera were “its masking style, fictional plot, and exaggerated characters” (p. 153). Modern drama continued the exaggerated and superficial characteristics of traditional drama, without really fully exploring the nature and capacity of dramatic performance. Zhu cites the example of Cao Yu’s 曹禺 viewing his own well-received play *Thunderstorm* 雷雨 as too dramatic and much less profound compared to the plays of Chekhov. Zhu also traces the trajectory of the development of Chinese drama and divides it into three stages: theater-oriented drama, literature-oriented drama, and media-oriented drama. Zhu characterizes “theater-oriented drama” as having “a nature of collective revelry.... Restrained by Chinese culture, the revelry is orderly and under control. It is a form of mental structure in which everyone participates or feels that he has the right to participate; it is not an actual description of an outward behavior, free and boundless” (p. 176). Zhu further comments on the “circular-spectator mentality” (p. 184) of the internet age and mobile-phone culture and the social phenomenon of staging exotic performances of foreign dramas performed in foreign languages. In Zhu’s narrative, Chinese drama has no progressive development. Each of the three stages equally demonstrates the author’s critique of the immaturity and superficiality of Chinese drama. Zhu’s argument that literature-oriented drama is a “new form of drama” remains unconvincing in light of his use of the Ming [1368-1644] romantic play *The Peony Pavilion* [*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭] and the Yuan [1271-1368] *zaju* 雜劇 drama *Romance of the West Chamber* [*Xi xiang ji* 西廂記] to illustrate that traditional drama is theater oriented. The fact that the Chinese dramatic texts, especially the southern *chuanqi* 傳奇 plays, were also perused by a literary audience is amply demonstrated in existing scholarship on readership and late imperial Chinese drama, such as Dorothy Ko’s *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth Century China*<sup>10</sup> and

9 Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

10 Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

Judith Zeitlin's "Shared Dreams: The Story of the Three Wives' Commentary on the *Peony Pavilion*."<sup>11</sup>

Chapter 4, "China and the World Literature and Culture," offers a case study of Chinese intellectuals' reception of Denmark literary critic Georg Brandes, a case study of the American Humanist Irvine Babbitt and his reception in China, and a comparative study of American Humanism and New Confucian Humanism [*xin ruxue renwen zhuyi* 新儒學人文主義]. Zhu's narrative of Brandes's thesis on exile and literature and on the "revolting" spirit of literature fails to take into account Zhu's proposition that literature and culture should be separate from the political. His discussion of the classical Chinese-language journal *Xueheng's* 學衡 publication of Babbitt's thought suggests that the debate between Liang Shiqiu 梁實秋 and Lu Xun on Babbitt might be due in part to a translation problem—Babbitt's thought was first introduced and translated into classical Chinese. Zhu's comparative analysis of New Humanism and New Confucian Humanism shows how cultural contact was made possible by the opportunities provided by foreign study among intellectuals such as Liang Shiqiu, Tang Yongtong 湯用彤, Wu Mi 吳宓, and Feng Youlan 馮友蘭. He concludes that "New Confucianism is New Humanism in Chinese cultural circles" "However, the influence of such Humanism is very limited in China but is very great in the cultural world of the Chinese language." (p. 262) This section ably illustrates Zhu's thesis on the influence of transnational cultural exchange on Chinese culture. But the discussion centers on Confucianism, philosophy, and religion, with no discussion of the relationships between religion, thought, and literature.

In terms of its overall structure, the book does not support Zhu's overarching thesis. The book also does not provide a new methodology for a reexamination of Chinese literature from a new perspective. The author's knowledge of traditional Chinese literature and culture is somewhat superficial. Encyclopedic and fragmentary in nature, the book lacks an argument-driven structure. Some sections in Chapter 4 in particular are repetitive. Another significant problem is its non-idiomatic English and the English translation of the Chinese terms. For instance, traditional southern *chuanqi* plays are usually translated as "romances" in English-language scholarship, rather than as "legends" (p. 262). Many footnotes lack page numbers for the works cited.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, *New Literature in Chinese* demonstrates Zhu Shoutong's erudite scholarship in the field of modern Chinese literature. Some of his observations are interesting and suggestive. Zhu's call

11 Judith Zeitlin, "Shared Dreams: The Story of the Three Wives' Commentary on the Peony Pavilion," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 54, no. 1 (1994).

for giving overseas Chinese writers equal footing in the discipline of modern Chinese literature and his stress on the importance of literary studies are both timely and commendable.

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