

The world in China, China in the world:
Decoding relations between World Literature
and literature in Mainland China in the 21st
century

by

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in the field of literary studies.

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List of publications

The dissertation consists of the following publications. The table below lists them, and states their publication status (as of DAY):

N.	Paper	Publication Outlet	Status*	Impact Factor/Points of the journal
1	Machajek, P., 2025. Multipolar community with a shared future: A review on World Literature discourse in China	<i>Framing, Interpretation, and Misinterpretation: Examples from Asia and Asian Diasporas</i> . Olomouc Asian Studies. Vol. 4. Olomouc: Palacký University Olomouc.	A	N/A
2	Machajek, P., 2025. What is happening to the ‘Chinese school’ of comparative literature? Comparatist approach countered by World Literature discourse	<i>Porta Orientalis 3: Orient w badaniach młodych naukowców</i>	A	N/A
3	Machajek, P., 2025. Transcend civilisations: on Chinese new literary theory enriching World Literature Studies	CL & WL (Chinese Literature & World Literature), no. 2, 2025	A	N/A
4	Machajek, P., Świątczak-Borowy, M., 2025. Li Zehou’s Ideas on Chinese Modernity Revisited	<i>Asian Studies</i> , 12(2), 43-61.	P	IF: 0.3 Ministry Points: 70

	Possible Applications of <i>Xi ti Zhong yong</i> .			
5	Pojęcie literatury światowej w Chinach Zarys historyczny oraz tendencje współczesne	N/A	U**	N/A
6	Co po kompleksie noblowskim? Nowe kierunki literatury chińskiej w kontekście literatury światowej	N/A	U**	N/A
7	Jacoby, M., Gryszkiewicz, A., Machajek P., Reismüller, F., 2025. Two sides of the mirror: Contesting Social Orders with Chinese Art Heterotopias	<i>Cogent Arts & Humanities</i> , 12.1 (2025): 2566271. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2025.2566271 .	P	IF: 0.9 Ministry Points: 100
8	Jacoby, M., Machajek P., Pessoptimist About China's Future: Scientific Progress and Social Harmony in <i>Hospital</i> by Han Song and <i>Nova</i> by Cao Fei.	<i>Journal of Current Chinese Affairs</i> , 0 (0), 2026. https://doi.org/10.1177/18681026251413255 .	P	IF: 3.43 (for 2024) Ministry Points: 70
9	Jacoby, M., Gryszkiewicz, A., Machajek P., Reismüller, F., 2024. Not all happy: Voices of social critique in contemporary Chinese culture (policy brief) + Research Notes	Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14499340 .	P	N/A
10	Jacoby, M., Gryszkiewicz, A., Ilczuk, D., Kamińska, T., Machajek P., Reismüller, F., 2023. Cooperation with the	Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10019950 .	P	N/A

	Chinese cultural sector in times of growing uncertainties (policy brief)			
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* “A” stands for Accepted, “P” stands for Published, and “U” stands for Unpublished

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Abstract (Polish)

Abstrakt

Literatura światowa w ostatnich trzydziestu latach stała się jedną z najistotniejszych obszarów badawczych we współczesnym literaturoznawstwie. Zarówno poszczególne składowe tego pojęcia, jak i cała fraza są instynktownie zrozumiałe nawet dla osób niezagłębionych w badaniach dyscypliny. Jasność ta okazuje się jednak pozorna, gdyż dyskusje nad definicją i zakresem pojęcia, jakie miały miejsce na przełomie poprzedniego i obecnego stulecia do dziś stanowią punkt odniesienia podlegający stałym korektom i przewartościowaniom.

Niniejsza praca doktorska stawia sobie za cel zbadanie współczesnego dyskursu literaturoznawczego w Chińskiej Republice Ludowej (dalej: ChRL) w świetle rozwijających się studiów nad literaturą światową. O ile do zagadnienia podchodzono już deskryptywnie według klucza: „literatura chińska jako literatura światowa”, to, wedle mojej wiedzy, nie prowadzono studiów nad ewolucją samego pojęcia i jego implikacji w chińskojęzycznym dyskursie literaturoznawczym i krytycznoliterackim. Kategoria literatury światowej nie jest jedynie nowym hasłem w obrębie literaturoznawstwa. Z dyskusji prowadzonych na całym świecie wykuwa się optyka, która stawia w nowym świetle znaczenie przekładu, kanonu, władzy symbolicznej i samej twórczości literackiej. Projekt ten podejmuje próbę twórczego podejścia do pojęcia literatury światowej i odczytania ostatnich trzech dekad dyskursu literackiego i krytycznoliterackiego w Chinach podług różnych interpretacji zagadnienia. Między innymi z tego względu badania zrealizowane w ramach niniejszego projektu każdorazowo przyjmowały nieco inne podejścia teoretyczne i metodologiczne. Stanowią one wypadkową różnorodnych zainteresowań w obrębie tej tematyki, co przekłada się zarówno na przeglądowe prezentacje najważniejszych ujęć teoretycznych, jak i uważne, „close-readingowe” analizy współczesnych tekstów literatury.

Niniejsza seria artykułów wypełnia luki badawcze, które można zakwalifikować w następujący sposób:

1. Luka kontekstowa – dotychczasowe badania nad współczesną literaturą chińską w kontekście literatury światowej skupiały się na poszczególnych autorach/zjawiskach w obrębie tej pierwszej, gdy tymczasem niniejsza praca proponuje szerszą i bardziej holistyczną kontekstualizację.
2. Luka wiedzowa – publikacje badaczy z ChRL w języku angielskim stanowią niewielką część debaty toczonej w Chinach na temat pojęcia literatury światowej, a przy tym dociekania te nierzadko pomijają niektóre specyficzne, lokalne konteksty. Niniejsza praca prezentuje dyskurs chińskojęzyczny i wielokrotnie traktuje go jako punkt wyjścia dla dalszych badań.
3. Luka teoretyczna – pojęcie i teoria literatury światowej są przedmiotem ciągłych renegocjacji. Niniejsza praca prezentuje ramy teoretyczne zaproponowane przez chińskich badaczy i twórców dla zrozumienia kategorii, które wcześniej często rządziły komparatystyką literacką: pojęcia wpływów, roli przekładu, czy też znaczenia porównania jako metody badawczej w literaturoznawstwie.

Praca wykazuje istnienie kilku tendencji. W ChRL rozumienie literatury światowej jest wysoce pozycjonalne, co oznacza, że kategorię tą definiuje się w pierwszej kolejności poprzez pryzmat lokalnej tradycji literackiej. Z drugiej strony, nowy, bardziej inkluzywny sposób dyskusji o literaturze jest postrzegany jako okazja do symbolicznego umocnienia chińskiej literatury w świecie. Umocnienie to dokonuje się także poprzez opisanie literatury światowej jako konstruktu równościowego i odrzucającego zachodnio-centryczne uprzedzenia. W swojej pracy te dążenia teoretyczne nazywam „repozycjonowaniem Chin”, gdyż sprawiedliwsza literatura światowa w rozumieniu chińskich badaczy wydaje się tożsama z systemem, który bardziej symetrycznie oddaje rosnące znaczenie kraju w świecie. W tym sensie, badania literaturoznawcze nad tym obszarem pozostają skorelowane z państwowym dyskursem porządku międzynarodowego. Po odejściu od tropów, które kierują literaturę na geopolityczne tory, zauważalne jest niesłabnące zaangażowanie w literaturę komparatystyczną, co pokazują fragmenty niniejsze pracy poświęcone tak zwanej chińskiej szkole komparatystyki literackiej. Pojęcie literatury światowej stanowi również podwaliny dla chińskich redefinicji własnej historii literatury, a także zapewnia inspirację do odchodzenia od dualizmu Chiny-Zachód, który od lat osiemdziesiątych stanowił podstawę dla dyskusji na temat miejsca rodzimej tradycji w świecie.

Artykuł 1 zawiera przegląd tekstów poświęconych zagadnieniu literaturze światowej opublikowanych w ChRL w XXI wieku. Do stworzenia korpusu tekstów posłużyła baza China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), archiwa oficjalnej strony Stowarzyszenia Pisarzy Chińskich chinawriter.com, a także, w mniejszym stopniu, przegląd innych źródeł. Analiza jakościowa słów kluczowych została zrealizowana przy pomocy oprogramowania do analizy danych MAXQDA. W tekście tym stawiam hipotezę repozycjonowania Chin, na którą znajduje dowody w poszczególnych tekstach teoretycznych. Przegląd około 120 tekstów (z czego około 60 doczekało się omówienia w artykule) opublikowanych po 2001 roku dał podstawę do wyróżnienia trzech głównych kierunków dyskusji o literaturze światowej w Chinach. Jest to podział umowny: różne dążenia i orientacje zarysowane poniżej przeplatają się ponad zaproponowaną dystynkcją. Pierwszy kierunek ma charakter dialogu i nierzadko krytyki pod adresem dominujących teorii w dyscyplinie. Do tej grupy zaliczyć można wyzwania rzucone zachodniocentrycznym konceptualizacjom oraz próby redefinicji pojęcia literatury światowej. Drugi kierunek skupia się na wykorzystaniu różnych teorii w obrębie szeroko pojmowanego marksizmu. Trzeci z kolei dokonuje translacji myśli Przewodniczącego ChRL Xi Jinpinga na język literaturoznawstwa. O ile dążenia te mogą wydawać się najmniej istotne z teoretycznego punktu widzenia, to pokazują zgodność chińskiego środowiska intelektualnego w formułowaniu pewnej wizji świata. W tym obszarze najpełniej widać wspomniane powyżej repozycjonowanie.

Artykuł 2 podejmuje temat niesłabnącego zainteresowania studiami nad literaturą komparatystyczną w Chinach. Kierunek ten w znacznym stopniu wyznacza przegląd literatury dokonany w artykule 1. To właśnie w ChRL doczekała się rozwinięcia idea chińskiej szkoły literatury komparatystycznej, zapoczątkowana przez badaczy z Hongkongu (zanim ten stał się częścią Chin) oraz Tajwanu. W artykule tym zaprezentowane zostały podstawy teoretyczne i ideowe szkoły, a także poddany rozważaniom został wpływ przeniesienia punktu ciężkości dyskusji literaturoznawczych ku literaturze światowej. Główne założenia tej szkoły sformułował Cao Shunqing, autor ważnej w Chinach i omawianej w artykule 3 teorii wariacji. Ważnym punktem odniesienia dla struktury tego tekstu jest zaproponowane przez przedstawicieli szkoły pojęcie „afazji”, które w tym kontekście oznacza niezdolność do formułowania samodzielnej (to jest: nierządzonej przez zachodnie paradygmaty) wiedzy na temat literatury. Oś artykułu przechodzi od wprowadzenia terminu do dyskursu i kończy się zaprezentowaniem dyskusji, które tę niesamodzielność uznają za niebyłą. Zaangażowanie w komparatystykę w Chinach pokazuje inny sposób traktowania literatury światowej: nie jako

nowego zagadnienia w dyscyplinie, które wypiera stare paradygmaty, lecz jako poszerzenie obszaru dotychczasowych dociekań.

Artykuł 3 w pogłębiony sposób zestawia trzy propozycje teoretyczne wypracowane przez chińskich badaczy, które spotkały się ze znaczącym odzewem w kraju i na forach międzynarodowych. Są to: badania globalnych elementów zaproponowane przez Chen Sihe, teoria wariacji silnie promowana przez Cao Shunqinga oraz bardziej ogólna, niemalże manifestowa wizja poetyki światowej przedstawiona przez Wang Ninga. W niniejszym artykule dokonuję analizy tych ujęć z pomocą pojęcia „krajobrazu idei” (*ideoscapes*) zaproponowanego przez antropologa Arjuna Appaduraia. Dodatkowo wskazuję w jaki sposób praca tych trzech badaczy przesuwają chińską teorię literatury z bardziej pasywnych pozycji przyjmowania teorii zachodniej ku proponowaniu ujęć mocniej zakorzenionych w chińskiej tradycji, które swym potencjałem wykraczają poza badanie rodzimej literatury. Zestawienie tych trzech teorii nie wynika z ich bezpośrednich podobieństw, a raczej wzajemnego dopełnienia. Przykładowo, propozycje Chen Sihe służą w głównej mierze nowemu ujęciu dwudziestowiecznej historii chińskiej literatury, gdy Wang Ning próbuje wytyczyć ścieżkę dla nowego obszaru w teorii literatury. Analiza tych trzech propozycji teoretycznych pozwala również prześledzić, jak w praktyce wygląda zasygnalizowana wcześniej gotowość chińskich badaczy do współtworzenia nowych paradygmatów w humanistyce, w tym wypadku – w literaturoznawstwie.

Artykuł 4 stanowi studium przypadku nad jednym z kluczowych zagadnień z punktu widzenia niniejszego projektu. Od początku lat osiemdziesiątych o kulturze literackiej w Chinach dyskutowano w oparciu o dwubiegunowe zestawienie Chin-Zachód. W tekście tym porównuję wybrane aspekty myśli filozoficznej Li Zehou z koncepcją mitorealizmu zaproponowaną przez jednego z ważniejszych współczesnych autorów chińskich, Yana Lianke. Li w połowie lat osiemdziesiątych XX wieku dokonał twórczego odwrócenia hasła „chińska nauka jako fundament, zachodnia wiedza dla celów praktycznych”. W jego interpretacji zachodnia myśl miała służyć jako fundament dla „chińskich zastosowań” rozumianych jako uaktualnienie rodzimej tradycji. W podobnym kluczu o wpływie dorobku literatury światowej na literaturę chińską pisze w swoich rozważaniach Yan Lianke. Są to rzadkie, a przy tym wpływowe przykłady godzenia dwóch „megaobiektów”: Chin i świata zachodniego. Tekst ten powstał we współpracy z Martyną Świątczak-Borowy z Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, która zestawiała koncepcję Li Zehou z pracą filozoficzną Sungmoon Kima skupioną wokół zagadnienia „konfucjanizmu publicznego rozumu” (*public reason Confucianism*). Wspólne badania nad

szerokimi zastosowaniami hasła Li Zehou pokazują, że debaty nad przydatnością obcych kulturowo teorii na gruncie chińskim dotykały w ostatnich dekadach w równym stopniu różnych obszarów życia intelektualnego. Yan Lianke jako krytyk literatury, a równocześnie pisarz, twórca zarówno szanowany w Chinach, jak i nierzadko cenzurowany, tworzy pomost pomiędzy teorią literatury, a praktyką, pomiędzy twórcą „lokalnym” a „światowym”. Zaproponowana przez niego kategoria mitorealizmu nie jest zarezerwowana dla jego własnej twórczości – z jej użyciem analizuje twórczość innych autorek i autorów tworzących w okresie post-maoistowskim. Założenia mitorealizmu zapewniają klucz interpretacyjny łączący współczesne pisarstwo chińskie z literaturą światową. W tym przypadku „zachodnie” z hasła *xi ti zhong yong* jest kategorią nawet szerszą, gdyż odnosi się do ogółu literatur obcych chińskiej tradycji.

Artykuły 5 i 6 jako jedyne w serii są tekstami polskojęzycznymi. W pewnej mierze stanowią one podsumowanie głównych założeń prowadzonych badań mające służyć powiększeniu stanu wiedzy w polskojęzycznym dyskursie akademickim. *Artykuł 5* przedstawia historyczny zarys pojęcia literatury światowej wraz z ogólnymi kierunkami toczących się obecnie debat, *Artykuł 6* zaś pokazuje nowy sposób myślenia o chińskiej literaturze w kontekście literatury światowej – „podejście kanoniczne” w ostatnich kilkunastu latach ustąpiło miejsca wielowątkowemu, rozproszonemu myśleniu gatunkowemu oraz większemu zainteresowaniu popularnymi produkcjami kulturalnymi. W obu tekstach istotną funkcję pełni omówienie „zmierzania do świata” chińskiej literatury (走向世界 *zouxiang shijie*). Ten paradygmat rozwojowy rządził chińską twórczością literacką po 1978 roku, a przy tym stanowił hasło nawołujące do szerszego otwarcia kraju na świat. W artykułach pokazane są także okoliczności odchodzenia od tego modelu, w dużej mierze niezwiązane z samą twórczością literacką w ChRL.

Artykuły 7-10 powstały i zostały opublikowane w ramach 3-letniej pracy w projekcie grantowym China Horizons: Dealing With A Resurgent China (DWARC) [projekt realizowany z grantu Horizon Europe nr 101061700 (konkurs HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-07)]. O ich roli w całokształcie projektu piszę obszerniej w sekcji **Contributions from China Horizons: Dealing With a Resurgent China**. Teksty to powstały we współpracy z innymi badaczkami i badaczami.

Artykuł 7 prezentuje wielodyscyplinarne odczytanie czterech współczesnych dzieł kultury: wystawy, filmu, opowiadania oraz sztuki teatralnej jako heterotopii, ujmowanej przeważnie

w kategoriach zaproponowanych przez Michela Foucault. Mój wkład, oprócz opracowania podwalin teoretycznych, skupił się na odczytaniu opowiadania *Stan transu* (*Chushen Zhuangtai* 出神狀態) autorstwa Chen Qiufana, w którym zaproponowałem termin heterotopii ambiwalencji (*heterotopia of ambiguity*), by opisać stan zapaści epistemologicznej, zaprezentowany jako rzeczywistość zastana – ani dobra, ani zła. Choć badania realizowane w ramach projektu DWARC skupiały się na społecznym zaangażowaniu sztuki w Chinach, to omawiany w artykule tekst Chen Qiufana dalece wykracza poza lokalny kontekst. Opowiadanie prezentuje wizję całkowitej zapaści epistemologicznej w późnym antropocenie, przy czym wspiera się tekstem wygenerowanym przez algorytm trenowany na twórczości Chen Qiufana. Ten eksperyment formalny zachęca do poszerzenia dyskusji na temat współczesnej twórczości literackiej o rozważania nad tzw. sztuczną inteligencją oraz „kreatywnością delegowaną” (Strafella & Berg 2023).

Artykuł 8 przedstawia porównawcze odczytanie dwóch dzieł, które można zaliczyć do kategorii sztuki spekulatywnej: powieści science-fiction Han Songa 韓松 *Szpital* (医院) analizowanej przeze mnie oraz retrofuturystycznego filmu pełnometrażowego Cao Fei 曹斐 pt. *Nova* (新星) analizowanego przez współautora tekstu, dr. hab. Marcina Jacoby’ego, prof. USWPS. Teksty te zostają zestawione z dominującymi w ChRL narracjami na temat rozwoju naukowo-technologicznego. Analiza ta pozwala na ukazanie dzieł Han Songa oraz Cao Fei jako kontrnarracji wobec utopijnego technologicznego determinizmu. W artykule wykorzystana zostaje optyka pesymizmu zaproponowana po raz pierwszy przez Callahana (2010). Pesymizm to ambiwalentne poczucie optymizmu w odniesieniu do dotychczasowych osiągnięć narodu i pesymizmu wobec jego przyszłości. W perspektywie dziejowej ta sama kategoria może łączyć w sobie ambitne dążenia do „renesansu narodu chińskiego” z pamięcią o „stuleciu upokorzeń”. Lektura powieści Han Songa stwarza okazję do przeanalizowania jak te historyczno-społeczne kategorie wpływają na teoretycznie neutralne i obiektywne osiągnięcia naukowe, a także w jaki sposób mogą kształtować inne, pozornie odległe obszary jak np. biopolitykę.

Artykuł 9 (policy brief) wraz z tak zwanymi research notes stanowią przegląd najważniejszych tematów poruszanych we współczesnej sztuce (literaturze, teatrze, filmie, sztukach wizualnych) tworzonej w ChRL. Moim wkładem w powstanie niniejszego briefu była analiza dzieł literackich (w tym, w mniejszym stopniu, nielicznych przykładów poezji). Wyróżnione zostały trzy kategorie główne: relacje międzyludzkie, presje strukturalne i ekonomiczne, problemy

tożsamości i dobrobytu. Przegląd ten pozwala na wskazanie paraleli między globalnymi wyzwaniami takimi jak nierówności ekonomiczne, rozpad więzi społecznych i brak poczucia bezpieczeństwa życiowego a zaangażowaniem chińskich twórców, w tym pisarek oraz pisarzy. Wbrew powszechnemu przekonaniu o nasilającym się działaniu aparatu cenzury w Chinach, praca ta pokazuje istnienie w lokalnym dyskursie przestrzeni do wyrażania różnorodnych obaw, frustracji i form sprzeciwu. Na podstawie analizy tematycznej autorki formułują rekomendacje dotyczące działań unijnej dyplomacji kulturalnej.

Artykuł 10 (policy brief) prezentuje szeroki ekosystem branż kulturalnych w ChRL od 2020 roku, z uwzględnieniem specyficznego zarządzania kryzysem pandemicznym w tym kraju. Dokument profiluje chińską sferę kultury jako amalgamat gospodarki centralnie planowanej z silną orientacją rynkową, która zmusza podmioty państwowe do intensywnej rywalizacji z prywatnymi przedsiębiorstwami. Ustalenia te pokazują w innym tekście pojedyncze dzieła kultury, takie jak dzieła literackie czy filmy jako produkty do potencjalnego rozwoju multimedialnego (w formie np. animowanych adaptacji, ekranizacji, gier, komiksów itd.). Innym ważnym obszarem analizy jest sfera nieoficjalna sfera *minjian* 民间; jest to obszar, w ramach którego autorki proponują poszukiwanie możliwości współpracy z chińskimi twórcami.

Czasopisma naukowe, do których niniejsze prace trafiały, mają różne wymagania dotyczące zapisu cytatów i źródeł bibliograficznych, co znajduje swoje odzwierciedlenie w ich niejednolitym zastosowaniu.

Abstract (English)

Over the past thirty years, World Literature has emerged as a significant topic in contemporary literary studies. The components of the phrase, namely “World” and “Literature,” are easily and instinctively understood by non-academic audiences. However, this apparent clarity does not reflect the ongoing debates over the definition and scope of the term, which originated at the start of the century and remain relevant today. These recent yet almost foundational contributions to current discussions are subject to continuous revisions and reassessments.

This doctoral dissertation aims to offer some insights into contemporary Chinese literature in the light of developing World Literature studies. Some mapping and descriptive attempts to present „Chinese literature as world literature” have been published (Zhang 2015, Wang 2016), yet, to my knowledge, there have been no studies on the evolution of the notion in Chinese literary and critical discourse. This research comprises several articles, and each of them

employed a slightly different theoretical and methodological approach. This project summarises the diverse interests within the subdiscipline of World Literature studies, which translates into both overview outlines of the most prominent theoretical approaches and close-reading analysis of contemporary works of literature. This series of articles addresses several research gaps, which may be classified as follows:

1. Contextual gap – previous research on contemporary Chinese literature within the framework of world literature has tended to focus on individual authors or specific phenomena within the former. By contrast, the present study offers a broader and more holistic contextualization.
2. Knowledge gap – publications by scholars from the People’s Republic of China in English constitute only a small portion of the debate on the concept of world literature taking place in China, and these texts oftentimes omit certain, specific local contexts. The present study foregrounds Chinese-language discourse and repeatedly treats it as a point of reference for further research presented here.
3. Theoretical gap – the notion and theory of world literature, the basic keywords of World Literature Studies, remain subject to ongoing renegotiations. The present study introduces theoretical frameworks proposed by Chinese scholars and writers for understanding categories that have long structured comparative literary studies, such as the notion of influence, the role of translation, and the significance of the comparison as a research method in literary scholarship.

My research findings point to a few tendencies. In the People’s Republic of China (hereinafter “the PRC”), which serves as the focus of my work, the understanding of world literature is highly positional. In this context, the category is defined first through the lens of local literary tradition. Moreover, the new, more inclusive way of discussing literature is perceived as an opportunity for the symbolic empowerment of Chinese literature on the world literary map. This empowerment is achieved by conceptualising World Literature as a construct of equality, one that rejects any West-centric biases. In my work, I call these theoretical pursuits “repositioning of China” because, as Chinese scholars see it, a more just World Literature is a system that symmetrically reflects the country’s growing global imprint. In this sense, literary research on the notion is correlated with the state’s discourse on international order. Leaving aside the tropes that pair literary theory with geopolitics, the new discourse has not weakened Chinese scholars’ strong engagement with comparative literature, as I illustrate in an article dedicated to the Chinese school of comparative literature. The notion of World Literature also

serves as a foundation for the Chinese rewriting of literary history and as an inspiration for discarding the binary China-West dichotomy. That distinction, since the 1980s, has framed discussions about where China's literary tradition stands in the world.

Article 1 presents an overview of mostly academic texts published in the PRC in the 21st century. To complete the text corpora that served as the starting point for my investigation, I used the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database, the China Writers' Association official website database (chinawriter.com), and, to a lesser degree, other sources. A qualitative analysis of keywords was performed with MAXQDA software. In this text, I propose the term "repositioning of China" and present supporting evidence from respective theoretical contributions by Chinese scholars. A survey of approximately 120 texts (around 60 of which are discussed in this article) published after 2000 provided the basis for distinguishing three main approaches to the discussion of world literature. This clarification is necessarily provisional, primarily because the various aspirations and orientations outlined below intersect and overlap the proposed distinctions. The first approach takes the form of dialogues and frequent critique of dominant theories within the discipline. The second approach focuses on the application of diverse theoretical frameworks within broadly conceived Marxism. The third, in turn, attempts to translate the thought of Xi Jinping, the current leader of the PRC, into the language of literary studies. Although these endeavours may appear least significant from a theoretical standpoint, they demonstrate a degree of consensus within the Chinese intellectual milieu in articulating a particular vision of the world. It is in this context that the repositioning mentioned above becomes most clearly visible.

Article 2 addresses the continued interest in comparative literature studies in China. The PRC is the place where the idea of the Chinese school of comparative literature, first initiated in Hong Kong (before it became a part of China) and Taiwan, was developed. This article presents the theoretical and ideological foundations of the school. It also discusses how literary studies' shift towards world literature impacts the Chinese school. The key ideological tenets of this school were formulated by Cao Shunqing, the proponent of the variation theory, which is influential in China and discussed in this article. An important point of reference for the structure of this article is the concept of "aphasia" as understood by representatives of the school. In this context, it denotes an inability to formulate autonomous knowledge about literature that is not governed by Western paradigms. The article's timeline moves from the introduction of the term into scholarly debate and concludes with the presentation of discussions that claim this lack of autonomy to be no longer valid. Engagement with comparative literature in China thus

reveals a specific way of approaching world literature: not as a new issue that presents new sets of concerns, but rather as an expansion of existing lines of inquiry.

Article 3 provides an in-depth comparison of three theoretical contributions made by Chinese scholars, all of which have garnered interest both in China and internationally. The three contributions are: search for “global elements” in Chinese literature proposed by Chen Sihe, researching „literary variations” strongly advocated by Cao Shunqing, and a more general, almost manifesto-like vision of global poetics introduced by Wang Ning. In this article, I analyse these three with the notion of ideoscapes put forward by Arjun Appadurai, an anthropologist focused on globalisation studies. Additionally, I present how the work of these scholars shifts Chinese literary theory from more passive positions of unwavering acceptance for Western theory toward independent contributions, which offer applications beyond the research of Chinese literature. The juxtaposition of these three theories does not stem from their direct similarities but rather from the potential for mutual complementarity. For example, the proposals advanced by Chen Sihe primarily serve to offer a new interpretation of twentieth-century Chinese literary history, whereas Wang Ning seeks to delineate a trajectory for a new domain within literary theory. An analysis of these three theoretical propositions presents how Chinese scholars co-create new paradigms in the humanities (literary studies, in this case) in practice.

Article 4 presents a case study of an area of great importance to my research. Since the 1980s, debates on literary culture in China have focused on a China-West dichotomy. In this article, I compare key aspects of Li Zehou’s philosophical thought with the idea of mythorealism promoted by one of China’s most significant contemporary fiction writers, Yan Lianke. In the mid-1980s, Li Zehou creatively reversed the old slogan of “Chinese learning as Substance, Western Learning for Application.” In his interpretation, Western thought would serve as a foundation for “Chinese application,” seen as a revitalisation of local tradition. Similarly, Yan Lianke discussed the influence of world literature on Chinese literary production. These are rare yet highly influential examples of reconciling two major entities – China and the Western world. This text is co-authored with Martyna Świątczak-Borowy from the University of Warsaw (Uniwersytet Warszawski), who juxtaposed Li Zehou’s concept with the philosophical work of Sungmoon Kim, which focused on public reason Confucianism. This collaborative research on the wide application of Li Zehou’s motto shows that in the past decades, discussions over the applicability of culturally foreign theories in China have spanned evenly over various areas of intellectual life. Yan Lianke, both a literary critic and a novelist, an author respected in

China yet frequently subject to censorship, forms a bridge between literary theory and practice, and between characteristics of the “local” and the “world” writer. The category of mythorealism proposed is not limited to his own work; he employs it to analyse the writings of other authors produced after 1978. The assumptions of mythorealism provide an interpretative key that links contemporary Chinese writing with world literature. In this case, the “Western” element in the formula *xi ti zhong yong* as a broader category that refers to all literatures external to the Chinese tradition.

Articles 5 and 6 are the only texts in this series written in Polish. To some extent, these articles offer a summary of key findings of my research. They are written in Polish to expand the local knowledge base. *Article 5* outlines the historical trajectory of the notion of World Literature in China, along with the general directions of literary debates in the PRC, while *Article 6* presents a new approach toward Chinese literature defined as a part of World Literature. Within the past decade or two, the „canon-based” approach has given way to multifaceted, dispersed genre thinking and greater interest in pop-cultural productions. In both texts, an important part is the discussion of “going global” (*zouxiang shijie*, 走向世界) – an endeavour set for Chinese contemporary literature. This developmental paradigm governed Chinese literary production after 1978 and simultaneously functioned as a slogan calling for a broader opening of the country to the world. The articles also outline the circumstances surrounding the departure from this model, which are partly unrelated to literary production in the PRC.

Article 7 offers a multidisciplinary reading of four contemporary art productions: an art exhibition, a feature-length film, a short story and a play. These four are read as a heterotopia, with the focus on how Michel Foucault conceptualised the notion. My key contribution to this text is the analysis of the short story *State of Trance* (*Chushen Zhuangtai* 出神狀態) by Chen Qiufan. I offered the term heterotopia of ambiguity to describe a state of epistemological demise, depicted as the existing state that is neither good nor bad. Although the research conducted within the DWARC Project focused on the social engagement of art in China, the text by Chen Qiufan discussed in the article extends far beyond the local context. The short story presents a vision of complete epistemological collapse in the late Anthropocene, drawing on a text generated by an algorithm trained on Chen Qiufan’s writing. This formal experiment invites an expansion of the discussion on contemporary literary production to include reflections on so-called artificial intelligence and “delegated creativity” (Strafella & Berg 2023).

Article 8 provides a comparative analysis of two works that can be labelled as “speculative art”. The first one is Han Song’s 韓松 novel *Hospital* (医院), analysed by me, while the second one is Cao Fei’s retro-futuristic full-feature film *Nova* (新星), analysed by the co-author of this article, Prof. Marcin Jacoby. The two works are juxtaposed with narratives on science and technology that dominate in the mainstream discourse of the PRC. The analysis performed in this article presents Han Song’s and Cao Fei’s work as a kind of counternarrative to utopian technological determinism. The article employs the optic of “pessoptimism”, first proposed in China Studies by Callahan (2010). Pessoptimism denotes an ambivalent stance that combines optimism regarding the nation’s recent achievements with pessimism about its future. From a historical perspective, the same category can encompass both ambitious aspirations toward the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and the memory of the “century of humiliation”. A reading of Han Song’s novel provides an opportunity to examine how these historical and social categories shape seemingly neutral and objective scientific achievements, as well as other distant domains such as biopolitics.

Article 9 (policy brief) and Research notes review the most prominent topics in contemporary arts (literature, theatre, film, and visual arts) made in the PRC. Three main topic clusters are identified: social and interpersonal dynamics, structural and economic pressures, and problems of identity and well-being. This survey identifies parallels between global challenges (such as economic inequality, the erosion of social bonds) and the engagement of Chinese cultural creators, including writers. Despite the common understanding of intensifying activities of the Chinese censorship apparatus, this work shows discursive spaces for expressions of various concerns and frustrations. Based on this review and assumptions, the authors formulate recommendations for the EU’s cultural diplomacy.

Article 10 (policy brief) presents the vast ecosystem of cultural sectors in the PRC since 2020. The brief takes into account the specific mode of pandemic crisis management. The document profiles the Chinese cultural sector as an amalgamation of a centrally planned economy with a strong market orientation, which pushes state companies to compete intensively with privately owned enterprises. These findings put a different light on singular texts of culture, such as literary writings or movies; they turn into a product that holds a potential for multimedial adaptations (into animations, movies, games, comic books, etc.). Another important area of this research includes the unofficial area of *minjian* 民间. The authors suggest that *minjian* becomes a bridge for the EU actors to cooperate with Chinese artists.

Publishing outlets have varying requirements for references, leading to different referencing styles in the texts authored by me and my esteemed co-authors.

Narrative summary

World literature is becoming a prevalent topic in today's field of literary studies. And it is happening despite, or perhaps because of, the lack of genuine methodological frameworks (Moretti 2006) that could help us outline the boundaries of the discussion. The very notion of world literature has also been an object of influential critiques, such as those made by Apter (2013), who opposed the common use of translated literature as a departure point for researching world literature. Nonetheless, the act of translation serves as a foundation of probably the most influential approach advocated by Damrosch (2003), who defined world literature as "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language."

The above is probably the briefest possible outline of the views that underpin current debates within World Literature studies. My research project aims to analyse the most recent history of Chinese literature in the light of this disciplinary paradigm shift. The developments between these two: World Literature studies and literature in Mainland China, do not occur in isolation and, as such, point towards wider phenomena beyond shifts in tone within academic debates. The shifts in Chinese literary discourse can tell us much about the country's changing self-perception and the imagined role of culture in this century.

The timeframes of my research interests are not arbitrary. The 21st century is perhaps often associated with widespread pronouncements of an "Asian century" (Mahhubani 2022) or a "Chinese century". These are of limited relevance when discussing literary history. Yet, the turn of the century saw the emergence of some milestone research on World Literature theory, and the past 20 years have seen Chinese literary theory transition from anxious mimicry to original contributions. This dissertation aims to document that process. The discussions on World Literature in the PRC intersect with politics, international relations, and broader global shifts towards a multipolar world. From a perspective, parts of the dynamics described here have evolved in the past 4 years of my project, thus putting these findings in a different light. My literature review presents reflections on the future multipolar (literary) world as hypothetical or desired. As we look at those now, we clearly see that many developments envisaged by Chinese scholars have turned into reality on the ground.

This research project does not seek to present a linear reconstruction of the history of an idea in the PRC. Rather, it traverses a range of areas, examined through the lens of World Literature studies. Such an approach attempts to treat World Literature not only as a wider topic but also as a method of investigating diverse topics of literary theory, circulation, and practices. To this end, I chose to develop the project as a series of articles, some of which are multiauthored and interdisciplinary, rather than as a monograph, the more conventional format for a doctoral dissertation in literary studies.

While this research must eventually conclude, it is worthwhile to focus further scholarly attention on the rebalancing of World Literature studies. One cannot entirely dismiss the possibility that Chinese literary discourse will become increasingly intertwined with Party-State politics. The discussions over deglobalisation may also translate into a completely different dynamic of cultural exchange. The same might be said of technological breakthroughs, such as the rapid development of Artificial Intelligence, which could further undermine the role of literature and fiction in many societies.

Theoretical Background

World Literature is a term that has been appearing in literature studies for two hundred years, but its potential to provoke debates and a paradigm shift has fully emerged only thirty years ago, triggered by the dynamics of globalisation.

The foundational stories of World Literature were provided by Goethe and, perhaps surprisingly, Marx and Engels. The former proposed a utopian, yet Eurocentric vision of dialogue that would broaden each country's horizons, while the latter two saw it as a link in the chain of global trade and exchange (Cheah, 2012). These two images remain highly influential in Chinese debates.

Formulating the theoretical background for this research required learning about the broader disciplinary landscape. The initial stage of desk research led me to list 4 areas of interest in World Literature among Chinese researchers:

1. The relationship between World Literature studies and comparative literature, with a special focus on Chinese contributions, such as the Chinese school of comparative literature and the variation theory.
2. World literature theory, dialogue with non-Chinese proposals, largely conducted from a Marxism-informed perspective.
3. Introducing Xi Jinping's thought into literary studies.

4. 'Repositioning China' – theoretical approaches aimed at shifting Chinese literature towards the centre of world literature.

The next stage involved comparing how the most influential approaches to World Literature published in English are discussed in the PRC. The political and intellectual climate predestines Chinese discourse to engage intensely with the wide array of theories associated with Marxism. As shown in my literature review, Chinese literary scholars aim to reclaim Marxist theory for the sake of "Chinese practice" (Wang 2020). The re-emerging focus on Marx-inspired economic structures and the powers behind literary text circulation is a feature that cannot be ignored. Two conceptualisations of World Literature received the most thorough and often critical feedback: Franco Moretti's economy-inspired idea of a singular world literature divided between centre and peripheries (2000, 2003), and World Literature as a mode of reading and circulation – the vision formulated by David Damrosch (2003). Damrosch views World Literature as spreading through translation, an intuition shared to a great extent by Chinese scholars, as well as by Chinese state institutions, which have invested significant funds in disseminating Chinese literature and scholarship. Translation, however, does not necessarily turn invested capital into recognition (Fang 2018). The question remains, however, whether "existence" in major Western languages is the only or the most important marker of belonging to World Literature (Zhang 2022, 54).

This shift from a universal toward positionality and relativity is more in line with the recent interest in regional world literatures. Karen Thornber (2009) offers a highly inspiring concept of contact nebulae, which refers to ambiguous spaces of intertwined literary and cultural contacts.

Speaking of any literary tradition (or simply literature) as a single whole is a risk of oversimplification and generalisation. It is, however, not a reductive approach to speak of Chinese literature as a unit within a wider context. Treating a complex semiotic phenomenon such as literature as a system rather than a dispersed set of texts has become a widely accepted practice in the humanities, which I follow, inspired mostly by (poly)system theory developed by Zohar (1990).

In article 3 on new Chinese literary theories related to World Literature studies, I combine this approach with the notion of ideoscape, proposed by Appadurai (1996). I find the perspectival and kaleidoscopic features of his elaboration particularly useful in presenting an idea of World Literature that revolves around different keywords, depending on the location of a speaker-

cum-actor. This attitude helped me recognise that debates on World Literature do not solely constitute a future-building project. In the Chinese context, they also initiate discussions on rewriting the country's literary history, as distinctly seen in Chen Sihe's work (2001, 2022).

Another set of theoretical approaches is presented in the articles on specific literary texts. Foucauldian heterotopia and pessoptimism, as conceptualised by Callahan (2009), proposed in articles 7 and 8, are by no means concepts to use specifically for Chinese literature, yet they may hint at the particularities of Chinese literary imagination. I offer this wording to avoid treating literature as a straightforward, mimetic document that serves to capture the country's sociopolitical reality. At the same time, that reality itself demands new aesthetic and theoretical modes of representation. Such a view is articulated by Yan Lianke, one of the most renowned internationally contemporary authors, who has proposed a term mythorealism; its meaning, World Literature inheritance and implications are presented in article 4.

Contributions from China Horizons: Dealing With a Resurgent China

During the past years, I have been involved in different research projects, and I have done as much as possible to find a common thread for all these activities. The key project I have participated in is China Horizons: Dealing With a Resurgent China (DWARC, under the HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-07 funding scheme).

The consortium aimed to provide EU decision-makers and policymakers with an independent knowledge base on China. From November 2022 to the end of October 2025, I was a part of the SWPS University team led by the supervisor of this dissertation, Professor Marcin Jacoby. The main role of this team was to research cultural productions published after 2012 to identify the most prominent topics of social interest. My personal role involved researching literary productions, while other members of the team concentrated on the areas of visual arts (Marcin Jacoby), film (František Reismüller), and theatre (Anna Gryszkiewicz). The SWPS University Work Package set out to answer the following questions:

- How do cultural texts reflect the aspirations of younger generations in the PRC?
- How are global trends (gender equality, new perspectives on human sexuality, the climate crisis) represented in cultural texts produced in the past 12 years in the PRC?
- What topics are absent from official state discourse and are evident in the analysed body of cultural texts?
- How have the last ten years of Xi Jinping's rule contributed to the scope of artistic freedom and the understanding of the role of literature in the PRC?

World Literature Studies transcends national affiliations but does not ignore local conditions. The four research outputs (listed above as 7, 8, 9, and 10) offer an outline of the sociopolitical context of literary activity in the PRC. They also demonstrate the “glocalized” specificity of many artistic outputs that address technological advancements, economic disparities, and environmental crises.

A policy brief is not the most common form of presenting research outcomes in literary studies. Recent studies in World Literature, however, situate this field of academic interest within a wider network of cultural studies, political forces, intercultural communication, and market forces. In this project, such briefs proved the most effective way to communicate how works of literature function in a wider socioeconomic setting and how understanding of this topic can spark an impulse for practical application.

Personal narrative

The initial ambition that fueled my PhD pursuits was to engage in research that would (un)cover as much of the contemporary literary landscape as possible. I wanted to leave no stone unturned: map all the tendencies, influences, prominent authors, and groups that have emerged in the past forty-plus years in the PRC. It did not take long for me to realise that it takes more than one person and more than one dissertation to even scratch the surface of such an endeavour. Still, I would search for something that could offer a wide perspective. The topic of “World Literature”, which soon attracted my attention, seemed to provide just that – a big picture, even if I did not know at the time how it would guide this research.

At the early stage of this project, I made a distinction that helped me navigate potentially distant research areas I've been interested in. I decided to divide the ideas for research articles into two categories: core research issues and case studies & related phenomena. This framework still reflects the trajectory of my work on this project. I am the only author of the articles that could be grouped as focused on the core research issues (numbers 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6), while the other five (4, 7, 8, 9, and 10) are the result of a cooperative and more interdisciplinary approach. The former group covers more general topics and dynamics, while the latter zooms in on specific texts, tendencies, and trends in the widely defined cultural sector in the PRC.

Taking my own positionality into account, constructing a bridge between World Literature studies and Chinese literary discourse has also become a matter of ethics. Any diagnosis of the condition of theoretical debates in China made by an external observer may lead to epistemic impositions. What is more, world literature may be tied to modernity

(Hitchcock 2011), and thus any evaluation of the “worldliness” of local literature implies the degree to which the source culture is modernised. To address these questions, I follow a located approach, as envisaged by the late Zhang Yingjin, the proponent of a category of Chinese-Sinophone literature. In Zhang’s terms, “located” designates “the recognition that literary scholars are inevitably located vis-à-vis both the created literary worlds they study and the realpolitik of historical and contemporary worlds in which they are implicated” (2022, 40). Despite often ambitious and unifying visions of World Literature (Zhang Longxi 2018), neither perspective can escape particularity.

The structure of this series reflects my ambition to combine different research commitments into a whole that coherently presents my engagement with contemporary Chinese literature. My research work and contribution enabled me to shift my focus from investigations into “grander” questions of all-encompassing theory towards one-of-a-kind particularities of literary works. This engagement taught me to navigate the most recent tendencies in Chinese contemporary fiction and to understand the context within which it operates. This project also provided me with an opportunity to learn about the synergies of multidisciplinary analysis of different cultural texts. I worked with specialists in film, theatre, visual arts, and society, which informed the way I looked at conditions shaping literary production in the current time.

The China Horizons project has helped me expand my academic skills, and its results present the scope of my interests, also on a personal level. This work has taught me and influenced me a lot, and therefore, it is an important part of my PhD project.

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“global elements” in relations between Chinese and foreign literature in the 20th century】 .
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Acceptance Confirmations

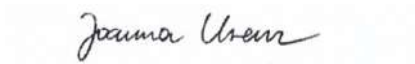
Poznań, 15.09.2025

Zaświadczenie

Niniejszym zaświadczamy, że artykuł p. Piotra Machajka pt. „What is happening to the ‘Chinese school’ of comparative literature? Comparatist approach countered by World Literature discourse’ otrzymał pozytywne recenzje i został przyjęty do publikacji w tomie *Porta Orientalis*. Planowana data publikacji to rok akademicki 2025/26.

Z poważaniem,

Redaktorki tomu



Acceptance Letter

6 December 2025

Journal: *Comparative Literature & World Literature (CL&WL)*
Issue: Volume 11, Number 2
Article Title: "Transcending Civilizations: On Chinese New Literary Theory Enriching World Literature Studies"
Author: Piotr Machajek

Dear Mr Piotr Machajek,

On behalf of the Editorial Board of *Comparative Literature & World Literature (CL&WL)*, we are delighted to inform you that your article entitled "Transcending Civilizations: On Chinese New Literary Theory Enriching World Literature Studies" has been accepted for publication in *CL&WL*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2025.

The reviewers and editors have evaluated your work positively, finding it to be a significant contribution to the field. We congratulate you on this achievement and thank you for choosing our journal as the venue for publishing your research.

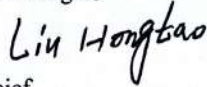
Prior to publication, the manuscript will undergo final copy editing and typesetting to conform to the journal's style. You will receive the page proofs for your final review and approval in due course. At that time, you will have the opportunity to correct any typographical or minor factual errors. Please note that substantial changes cannot be made at the proof stage.

Please feel free to contact the editorial office at if you have any questions.

Once again, congratulations on your acceptance. We look forward to publishing your work and to your continued engagement with *Comparative Literature & World Literature*.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Liu Hongtao



Editor-in-Chief

Comparative Literature & World Literature (CL&WL)



Department
of Asian Studies
Faculty of Arts
Palacký University Olomouc

Genius loci ...

PROOF OF PUBLICATION

Dear Committee,

This is to confirm that a chapter entitled “Multipolar community with a shared future: A review on world literature discourse in China” written by Piotr Machajek has been accepted for publication in a collective monograph *Framing, Interpretation, and Misinterpretation: Examples from Asia and Asian Diasporas*, edited by Veronika Abbasová, Iuliia Koreshkova, and Lenka Vyleťalová (Palacký University Olomouc).

The volume is scheduled to be published by Palacký University Press as the 4th volume in the newly established Olomouc Asian Studies (OLAS) series. It will be an Open Access and Print on Demand publication. The estimated publication date is spring 2026.

In case of any questions, please contact me at olas@upol.cz.

Olomouc,
18 February 2026

Mgr. Halina Zawiszová, Ph.D.
Editor in Chief

PRZEGLĄD ORIENTALISTYCZNY

Warszawa, 9 marca 2026 r.

ZAŚWIADCZENIE

Komitet Redakcyjny „Przełądu Orientalistycznego” zaświadcza, że artykuł pt. *Pojęcie literatury światowej w Chinach. Zarys historyczny oraz tendencje współczesne* autorstwa pana Piotra Machajka został pozytywnie zaopiniowany przez recenzentów i przyjęty do druku w „Przełądzie Orientalistycznym”. Artykuł zostanie opublikowany w najbliższym numerze naszego czasopisma, tj. 1–2 (2026).

PRZEGLĄD ORIENTALISTYCZNY



dr Stanisław Jan Kania
Sekretarz redakcji
„Przełądu Orientalistycznego”

Statements of Co-Authors

Warszawa, 3 grudnia 2025

Martyna Świąteczak-Borowy

Afiliacja: Szkoła Doktorska Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Wydział Filozofii

OŚWIADCZENIE

Oświadczam, że:

W artykule *Li Zehou's Ideas on Chinese Modernity Revisited. Possible Applications of Xi ti Zhong yong*, opublikowanym w *Asian Studies*, 12(2), 43-61, doi.org/10.4312/as.2024.12.2.43-61

moje zaangażowanie dotyczyło krytycznej analizy tekstu we wszystkich jego częściach. Jestem współautorką sekcji: *Introduction*; *Xi ti Zhong Yong: the content and the context*; *Conclusion*. Jestem główną autorką sekcji *Sungmoon Kim's Public Reason Confucianism*.

Mój wkład w pracę oceniam na **50 procent**.

Martyna Świąteczak-Borowy

Gdańsk, 15.12.2025r
miasto, data

dr Anna Gryszkiewicz
Afilacja: Uniwersytet Gdański

OŚWIADCZENIE

Oświadczam, że:

w tekście *Cooperation with the Chinese cultural sector in times of growing uncertainties*,
opublikowanym w Zenodo, doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10019950,

byłam współautorką tekstu i główną autorką informacji na temat teatru i wydarzeń teatralnych
w ChRL w badanym okresie.

Mój wkład w powstanie tekstu oceniam na **15 procent**.


.....

Warszawa, 18.02.2025
miasto, data

dr hab. prof. Dorota Ilezuk
Afilacja: Uniwersytet SWPS

OŚWIADCZENIE

Oświadczam, że:

w tekście *Cooperation with the Chinese cultural sector in times of growing uncertainties*, opublikowanym w Zenodo, doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10019950,

byłam odpowiedzialna za konceptualizację tekstu, metodologię badań, zebranie materiałów oraz opracowanie infografiki.

Praca powstała w ramach projektu China Horizons: Dealing With A Resurgent China (DWARC) [projekt realizowany z grantu Horizon Europe nr 101061700 (konkurs HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-07)].

Mój wkład w powstanie tekstu oceniam na **25 procent**.


.....

Warszawa, 18.12.2025

dr hab. Marcin Jacoby, prof. USWPS

Afiliacja: Uniwersytet SWPS

OŚWIADCZENIE

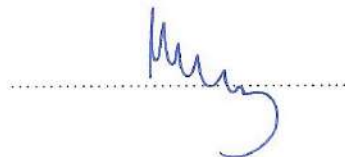
Oświadczam, że:

w tekście *Cooperation with the Chinese cultural sector in times of growing uncertainties*, opublikowanym w Zenodo, doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10019950,

byłam odpowiedzialna za konceptualizację tekstu, metodologię badań, zebranie materiałów, opracowanie infografiki, pisanie i redakcję tekstu, a także jego publikację.

Praca powstała w ramach projektu China Horizons: Dealing With A Resurgent China (DWARC) [projekt realizowany z grantu Horizon Europe nr 101061700 (konkurs HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-07)].

Mój wkład w powstanie tekstu oceniam na **30 procent**.



Warszawa, 18.12.2025

dr hab. Marcin Jacoby, prof. USWPS

Afiliacja: Uniwersytet SWPS

OŚWIADCZENIE

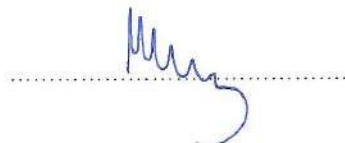
Oświadczam, że:

W artykule *Critical visions of China as a perfectly harmonious society and a world leader in science: "Hospital" by Han Song and "Nova" by Cao Fei* przyjętym do publikacji na łamach *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*,

moje zaangażowanie dotyczyło pisania, redakcji i krytycznej analizy tekstu. Jestem głównym autorem abstraktu, przeglądu literatury poświęconej Cao Fei, analizy filmu *Nova*, a także propozycji podziału tematycznego, w ramach którego przeprowadzona została analiza porównawcza obu dzieł.

Praca powstała w ramach projektu *China Horizons: Dealing With A Resurgent China (DWARC)* [projekt realizowany z grantu Horizon Europe nr 101061700 (konkurs HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-07)].

Mój wkład w powstanie niniejszego tekstu oceniam na **50 procent**.



Warszawa, 18.12.2025

dr hab. Marcin Jacoby, prof. USWPS
Afilacja: Uniwersytet SWPS

OŚWIADCZENIE

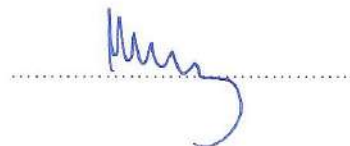
Oświadczam, że:

w artykule *Two sides of the mirror: Contesting social orders with Chinese art heterotopias* opublikowanym na łamach *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 12(1), doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2025.2566271,

moje zaangażowanie obejmowało: konceptualizację pracy, pozyskanie funduszy, opracowanie metodologii i pracę nad pisaniem oraz redakcją tekstu we wszystkich jego wersjach. Jestem głównym autorem sekcji *A multi-layered mirror and the heterotopia of transition*.

Praca powstała w ramach projektu China Horizons: Dealing With A Resurgent China (DWARC) [projekt realizowany z grantu Horizon Europe nr 101061700 (konkurs HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-07)].

Mój wkład w powstanie niniejszego tekstu oceniam na **25 procent**.



Warszawa, 18.12.2025

dr hab. Marcin Jacoby, prof. USWPS

Afiliacja: Uniwersytet SWPS

OŚWIADCZENIE

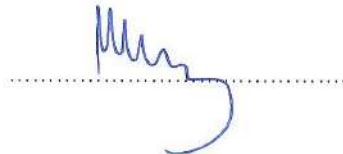
Oświadczam, że:

w tekście *Not all happy: Voices of social critique in contemporary Chinese culture*, opublikowanym w Zenodo, doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14499340,

moje zaangażowanie obejmowało: pisanie i redakcję tekstu, ocenę zebranych materiałów oraz publikację tekstu. Jestem głównym autorem badań i informacji na temat sztuk wizualnych. Powyższe role odnoszą się również do załącznika pt. *Not all happy: Voices of social critique in contemporary Chinese culture – Research Notes*.

Praca powstała w ramach projektu China Horizons: Dealing With A Resurgent China (DWARC) [projekt realizowany z grantu Horizon Europe nr 101061700 (konkurs HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-07)].

Mój wkład w powstanie tekstu oceniam na **25 procent**.



Gdańsk, 15.12.2025 r.
miasto, data

dr Anna Gryszkiewicz
Afilacja: Uniwersytet Gdański

OŚWIADCZENIE

Oświadczam, że:

w artykule *Two sides of the mirror: Contesting social orders with Chinese art heterotopias* opublikowanym na łamach *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 12(1), doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2025.2566271,

moje zaangażowanie obejmowało: konceptualizację pracy, opracowanie metodologii i pracę nad pisaniem oraz redakcją tekstu we wszystkich jego wersjach. Jestem główną autorką sekcji *Echoing: The seagull: a heterotopia of dispersed agency*.

Praca powstała w ramach projektu China Horizons: Dealing With A Resurgent China (DWARC) [projekt realizowany z grantu Horizon Europe nr 101061700 (konkurs HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-07)].

Mój wkład w powstanie niniejszego tekstu oceniam na **25 procent**.



Gdańsk, 15.12.2020,
miasto, data

dr Anna Gryszkiewicz
Afilacja: Uniwersytet Gdański

OŚWIADCZENIE

Oświadczam, że:

w tekście *Not all happy: Voices of social critique in contemporary Chinese culture*, opublikowanym w Zenodo, doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14499340,

moje zaangażowanie obejmowało pisanie oraz redakcję tekstu. Jestem główną autorką badań i informacji na temat sztuk teatralnych. Powyższe role odnoszą się również do załącznika pt. *Not all happy: Voices of social critique in contemporary Chinese culture – Research Notes*.

Praca powstała w ramach projektu China Horizons: Dealing With A Resurgent China (DWARC) [projekt realizowany z grantu Horizon Europe nr 101061700 (konkurs HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-07)].

Mój wkład w powstanie tekstu oceniam na **25 procent**.

.....*Anna Gryszkiewicz*.....

Prague, December 15th, 2025

František Reismüller, PhD

Affiliation: SWPS University, Chodakowska 19/31, 03-815 Warsaw

STATEMENT

I declare that:

in the paper *Two sides of the mirror: Contesting social orders with Chinese art heterotopias*, published in *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 12(1), doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2025.2566271,

my involvement included: investigation, methodology, project administration, writing the original draft, as well as writing, reviewing, and editing the final version. I am the corresponding author of this piece.

This research is a part of China Horizons: Dealing With a Resurgent China (DWARC, under the HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-07 funding scheme), during which I was affiliated with the SWPS University.

I declare my contribution to this work as **25 per cent**.


.....

Prague, December 15th, 2025

František Reismüller, PhD

Affiliation: SWPS University, Chodakowska 19/31, 03-815 Warsaw

STATEMENT

I declare that:

in the policy brief *Not all happy: Voices of social critique in contemporary Chinese culture*, published in Zenodo, doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14499340,

my involvement included: investigation, writing and editing the text. I author all the research and information related to the film and film industry, which also applies to the attachment of this brief titled *Not all happy: Voices of social critique in contemporary Chinese culture – Research Notes*.

This research is a part of China Horizons: Dealing With a Resurgent China (DWARC, under the HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-07 funding scheme), during which I was affiliated with the SWPS University.

I declare my contribution to this work as **25 per cent**.



.....

Prague, December 15th, 2025

František Reismüller, PhD

Affiliation: SWPS University, Chodakowska 19/31, 03-815 Warsaw

STATEMENT

I declare that:

in the policy brief *Cooperation with the Chinese cultural sector in times of growing uncertainties* published in Zenodo, doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10019950,

my involvement included writing parts of the text. I author all the research and information related to the film and film industry.

This research is a part of China Horizons: Dealing With a Resurgent China (DWARC, under the HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-07 funding scheme), during which I was affiliated with the SWPS University.

I declare my contribution to this work as **15 per cent**.


.....

Warszawa, data 14.02.2026 r.

Tamara Kamińska

Afiliacja: Uniwersytet SWPS

OŚWIADCZENIE

Oświadczam, że:

w tekście *Cooperation with the Chinese cultural sector in times of growing uncertainties*, opublikowanym w Zenodo, doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10019950,

byłam współautorką badań, które pozwoliły na stworzenie infografiki oraz sekcji: *Introduction – the Chinese cultural sector general characteristics; The specificity of the Chinese cultural sector*.

Praca powstała w ramach projektu China Horizons: Dealing With A Resurgent China (DWARC) [projekt realizowany z grantu Horizon Europe nr 101061700 (konkurs HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-07)].

Mój wkład w powstanie tekstu oceniam na **10 procent**.

14.02.2026, 21:32:51
Tamara Kamińska
Kwalifikowany podpis elektroniczny

Multipolar community with a shared future: A review on world literature discourse in China

This text was positively evaluated by reviewers in February 2025 and will be published in a collective monograph *Framing, Interpretation, and Misinterpretation: Examples from Asia and Asian Diasporas*, published by Palacký University as the fourth volume of the Olomouc Asian Studies (OLAS) series. The expected publication date is spring 2026.

Abstract:

During the past three decades, the discussion on world literature has moved to the mainstream of literary studies. Debates in China are no exception to this trend. The content and specifics of Chinese interpretations and discussions on the idea, however, remain rather unknown outside of academic discussions conducted in Chinese. This review article presents some of the dominant topics in world literature discourse in the PRC since the beginning of the 21st century. The focus of the research is set on academic discourse on the current trends in theorizing the term, as well as the potential role of the local literary tradition and theory in reframing and reinterpreting *Weltliteratur*. I argue that a significant amount of the research on world literature in the PRC is not merely descriptive but strives to influence the way China is seen and discussed on the global literary scene. I call this tendency the “repositioning of China”, which could be defined as a dispersed, yet coherent theoretical work to move Chinese literature and literary theory towards the global center, rebalance power relations in the widely defined field of culture, and increase China’s “discourse power” 话语权 *huayuquan*. The repositioning does not necessarily and by default serve the country’s immediate political interest but can be seen as a process of reimagining the world map in a way that is somewhat parallel to developments in global politics and goals of the PRC diplomacy.

Keywords: World Literature; Chinese literary theory; Chinese literature; literature studies; politics of literature

1. Introduction

For the past three decades, the “worlding” of literature has been a prevailing tendency both in literary theory and literary critique. By this still somewhat ambiguous term, I refer to many dispersed discursive actions, such as mapping local and regional literatures in a wider perspective, reinterpreting literary works in search of meanings that go beyond their cultural landscapes, and shaping the discourse of world literature – an object for which “we do not yet have a genuine theory [...] – however loosely defined” (Moretti 2006, 113; Liu 2012). As Czaplínski (2014) points out, world literature discourse nowadays is competing with postcolonial reflection and has grown to become the successor of comparative literature. In doing so, it is becoming one of the most important paradigms for discussing literature, both inside and outside academic circles.

China is no exception to this trend, quite the opposite – the country embraced the idea even on the institutional level by forming a “global alliance for world literature studies”¹ – World Literature Association (WLA), founded in 2011. According to Yang and Wei (2023), China is second only to the US when it comes to producing scientific papers on world literature (世界文学 *shijie wenxue*) in the 21st century. Naturally, Chinese interest in the subject dates back a long time, so these examples reflect not only the international interest in the topic of world literature, but also a constantly expanding body of local world literature theory.

This review article aims to summarize some of the dominant topics in world literature discourse in the PRC since the beginning of the 21st century. Like many other scholars in the field (refer to e.g. D’haen, Damrosch and Kadir 2012), I do not adhere to a single authoritative definition of world literature in my analysis but instead shed light on those who present their own ideas on the matter. My other goal is to present the circles of China’s literary scholarship – the most notable figures and their theoretical orientations. Adopting this approach is going to make the discussion more eligible for the audiences with no China expertise.

Limiting the scope of research to a specific geographic area may stand in contrast to the premise of world literature, which aims to break down national, political or cultural

¹ The wording comes from Peking University website: https://newsen.pku.edu.cn/news_events/news/campus/1337.html [accessed: 5th October 2022]. Liu (2024) proposes another landmark event for World Literature Studies in China: The 5th China-US Bilateral Conference on Comparative Literature, held in 2010.

demarcations. What is more, Chinese scholars pursue their interests in various parts of the world, which is a “natural” side-effect of globalization processes. Zhang Yingjin (张英进), who recently has passed away, could serve as the most striking example of that. Zhang spent most of his academic career outside of the PRC, yet his pathbreaking contribution to discourses on “Chinese-Sinophone Literatures as world literatures” is hard to overestimate (see, e.g., Fiss 2023).¹ I do not wish to suggest that any expression of China and Chineseness may happen only within one set of preconditions. What I am mostly interested in are not such distinctions, but rather the attempts to produce ideas that might be considered “genuinely Chinese” – rooted in China’s theoretical tradition and literary practice. Therefore, I try to make a note of relevant contributions made outside of the PRC, yet still consider the discussions in the PRC to be the starting and main reference point. Even if limited, this angle contributes to ongoing international debates on “global Chinese literature” and Sinophone literature (for those see, e.g., Tsu and Wang 2010).

This area of study remains mostly uncharted territory outside of academic discussions conducted in Chinese. Wang Ning (王宁), one of the leading PRC scholars interested in the topics related, such as Western theory, translation and literary theory exchange, admits (2016) that the “dominant position of West-centrism makes expecting others to ‘discover’ our research unrealistic.” This research hopes to bridge this gap. A very recent review of a similar kind has been published by Liu (2024), which coincided with my work on this article. Liu’s work, although informative and thorough, opts for a much narrower scope for outlining the topic. His analysis focuses on selective essays published in just one journal, *Comparative Literature in China*. The journal is China’s one of the most prestigious in the field, therefore our findings may occasionally overlap.

My review has shown three main angles in discussing the topic. They could be summed up as: dialogues with world literature theory, a strong commitment to Marxist theory, and last, but certainly not least, attempts to introduce notions derived from Xi Jinping Thought into the world literature discourse. The first of the angles represents Chinese scholars’ engagement with the work of the most prominent scholars conceptualizing the notion and realities of world

¹ The source referenced is an introduction to a special issue of *Chinese Literature and Thought Today* (Vol. 53, no. 3-4), dedicated to commemorating Zhang’s intellectual heritage; the whole issue could serve to prove the point made above.

literature. Secondly, Marxism serves as an ideological foundation of Chinese intellectual life. Research on Marxism could be included as a subpart of the other two angles referred to in this paragraph, yet its presence supported by institutional structure (nearly all universities in China have separate schools of Marxism) is so remarkable that I have decided to make the distinction. Thirdly, China's new position under Xi Jinping's leadership is followed by a series of concepts/slogans, which have become a part of the grammar of literary scholars in the PRC. Unsurprisingly, these three dimensions intermingle with each other (e.g., Xi Jinping's Thought with Marxism) and include other visible tropes, such as post-colonial theory, studies on globalization, cultural studies, etc.

The key finding of this review is that a significant portion of the discussions about world literature in the PRC are not merely descriptive but strive to change the way China is perceived on the global literary scene. Topics such as “Chineseness” of literature or the so-called “China question” (中国问题 *Zhongguo wenti*, see Yao 2014, Liu 2021) of literary theory provoke a number of debates about the country's position in what could be roughly translated as “the forest of world literature” (世界文学之林 *shijie wenxue zhi lin*).¹ The new framework of world literature is seen as a levelling field that could help to move away from the West-centric literary landscape. There is a noticeable tendency to advocate for what I call a “repositioning of China” – dispersed, yet coherent and consistent theoretical work that strives to move Chinese literature and literary theory towards the global center. This repositioning involves a set of tendencies visible upon observing the PRC discourse on world literature. Apart from deconstructing the mechanisms of West centrism and pointing out its structural injustices, Chinese scholars rewrite its literary history to move away from analyzing the past century in the framework of “following/importer”. Both Marxist approaches and those inspired by Xi Jinping Thought point to “Chinese practice” that shall prove the relevance of Chinese reinterpretations of world literature. The main part of this review shall explore how these are elaborated.

2. Methodology

I aim to identify the most prominent patterns of conceptualizing world literature, so my review is not a linear history of the most recent literary discourse in the PRC *per se* (although I try to

¹ 林 *lin* may also refer to a group of similar objects or a circle (such as “academic circle”), yet the imagery of forest, an entity that is organic, interconnected and (partly) independent from human intervention, seems very fitting to the idea what world literature could represent.

pursue the chronological order, whenever possible). To do so, I use the toolbox of qualitative discourse analysis performed with MAXQDA software. Within the proposed method, I employ *a priori* coding¹ and thematic analysis. The first reading of the sources enabled to identify the keywords, such as: West-centrism (西方中心主義 *xifangzhongxinzhuyi*), Marxism (馬克思主義 *Makesizhuyi*), “worldliness”² (世界性 *shijiexing*), globalization (全球化 *quanqiuhua*), “literary community” (文學共同体 *wenxue gongtongti*) or “discourse power” (話語權 *huayuquan*). Tracing the way the keywords are contextualized informed the groupings proposed in the article.

The first draft of this article presented the ideas chronologically. The initial assumption was that such arrangement would reveal shifts in tendencies and topics discussed. It proves relevant in the area of Xi Jinping Thought, since the responses are reactive and correlate with the time of putting forward specific slogans (China Dream, “community with a shared future for humankind”, etc.). However, as for other sections, ideas included circulate with varying intensity, therefore the section 3 is organized by thematic clusters rather than the chronological listing of scholars and their arguments.

Articles and sources were mostly collected from the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) database and, to a lesser degree, from the China Writers Association Website archive, as well as from other sources deemed relevant in the process of conducting this review; the mentioned other sources apply mostly in the subsection dedicated to Xi Jinping Thought, since its potential application in world literature discourse is oftentimes elaborated in press and public talks.

Some topics were deliberately omitted such as: world literature in university education, research on foreign literatures by Chinese scholars (e.g., “French literature as world literature”) or strictly historical analysis of the term. Therefore, I do not claim to provide a complete review of world literature discourse in the PRC in all potential uses and interpretations of the term.

3. To Comment and to Contribute: Dialogues with World Literature Theory

¹ *A priori* coding here refers to the ideas that constitute the current debates on world literature, for examples see D’haen, Damrosch and Kadir 2012.

² Understood as a feature of belonging to global cultural landscape or as a measure of quality.

Research and comments on leading international figures of world literature theory such as David Damrosch, Emily Apter, Theo D’haen, and many others, occupy a significant space in Chinese publications on the topic, as presented by Yang Feng (杨枫) and Wei Dingwen (韦丁文) (in Yang and Wei, 2023). While these foundational theorists remain influential, my interests focus on Chinese scholars actively reshaping the discourse to reflect their perspectives and the discussions that turn out more transformative in mapping Chinese literature and Chinese literary theory within world literature discourse. The tension along the China-West axis is a constant element of the theoretical contributions presented here. This section spans from reformulating comparative literature’s role to proposing more equal models for literary recognition, all being a part of the attempts to extend the theoretical scope of World Literature studies.

3.1 The Role of Comparative Literature

In the Chinese context, comparative literature does not contradict world literature. Naming comparative literature an important part of world literature discourse (a common practice among Chinese scholars) raises questions about the interdependence of these two notions. To address those questions, I refer to a still relevant remark by Bassnett (1993), who suggests that “[...] the so-called crisis is not experienced by Chinese comparatists, because they have constructed literary studies from a different ideological base, [...] not an abstract idea of transcultural universal beauty but the immediate needs of their own culture.”

Wang Ning voiced the support for the discipline very much flourishing in China, arguing that research on world literature is, in fact, “the culmination of comparative literature” (Wang 2006, 163). He did so in the aftermath of Spivak’s book *Death of a Discipline*, which, despite the title, is more of a manifesto for the rebirth or the new stage for comparative literature (see also Wang 2022, 64). Wang is not the only scholar to uphold the relevance of comparative literature. Liu Hongtao (刘洪涛), a scholar from Beijing Normal University (北京师范大学), who has shaped the Chinese debate on the relations between world literature and national literature, notes that the part that world literature plays in comparative literature is very much neglected in China’s literary circles (Liu 2003). Liu, like many of his colleagues, sees world literature as impossible to detach from comparative literature. On the other hand, he believes in China’s gravitas that is impossible to resist, as he quotes Zeng Yanbing (曾艳兵): “[...] as

a Chinese scholar, no matter how much you borrow and apply Western¹ thought and methods, your research is always primarily Chinese” (Zeng 2000, also Liu 2003, 139). Huang Wan (黄晚) wonders about the sources of comparison in world literature and comparative literature (Huang, 2022). He claims that the only way to contextualize any discussion on the topic is to underline the differences between literary traditions, which Huang calls “references”. At the same time, Huang states that Chinese scholars should reflect on how to “reconstruct the discursive patterns”. He believes that the “central discursive system” is based on Western literature and literary theory, but also claims that such a situation is partly justified by Western “strong research tradition”. Huang imagines a literary system more influenced by Chinese academic influence, yet states that a simple replacement of theoretical reference points is not easy without creating a “self-referential” discourse. Huang believes that new “references” will shape world literature from multiple local literatures (ibid.). This is an example of a more recent voice² that combines comparatist paradigm and the ongoing discussions on the wider categories, such as world literature.

3.2 Critiques of Western-Centric Models

“World literature” has never been a neutral term to describe the sum of local literatures, and the potential ideological implications of it are noted by Chinese scholars. The remarkable share of their contributions aims to identify the injustices of the existing framework of world literature. Yunnan University’s (云南大学) Wang Weidong (王卫东) and Yang Lin (杨琳) claim that world literature enforces power relations and carries value judgement (Wang and Yang 2004). They also believe that the enthusiasm in China for discussing relations between world literature and Chinese literature stems from the desire to come back to cultural centrality on a global scale. Wang Ning (2010b) pays attention to the imbalance between world literature and Chinese literature, since the former benefitted the latter, yet without promoting it, which resulted in a “very peripheral” position of Chinese literature. On the other occasion, when analyzing cosmopolitanism in the context of world literature, Wang expresses a belief that the share of Chinese literature should reflect the country’s position in the world (Wang 2012). At the same

¹ At this point, it is worth pointing out that “Western” in this context, and in the following parts of this review, refers to the widely defined, “collective” West, without clear distinction between the specific regions or countries. This is a typical discursive practice among Chinese scholars.

² Another interesting take is presented by Jiang (2018), referred to in section 4.

time, he claims the literary relations between China and the outside world to be one-sided. While Chinese literature moved closer to the global mainstream, in return it also “greatly Westernized”. These arguments, which point to the supposed injustices embedded in the history of Chinese literature of the past 40 years, are exemplary for the act of repositioning.

Ding Guoqi (丁国旗), the deputy director of the Institute of Literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (中国社会科学院文学研究所), who engages mostly in research on Marxist literary theory, voiced a relatively representative view among the country’s theorists that world literature carries discourse power that establishes global order in the literary sphere (Ding 2010). Ding claims that world literature, as opposed to national literatures, pursues centralized, universal, and specifically designed measures of aesthetic values that partly play the role of gatekeepers. Liu Hongtao and his frequent collaborator Zhang Ke (张珂) in their review of the most prominent topics in world literature claim that a relatively new enthusiasm for multiculturalism does not translate into substantial changes in the structure of the literary system,¹ still divided into center, semi-peripheries and peripheries (Liu and Zhang 2014). Authors from peripheral areas gain recognition only by following modern aesthetics established by the center. More recognition for Chinese literature won with translations and outside reception has still failed to move the local literature toward the more prestigious areas of the “global village.” In other words, earning some cultural capital is not enough to change the country’s position on the map of world literature (ibid.). Despite some pessimism voiced by Chinese scholars, translations undeniably remain the most natural process of literary circulation beyond its linguistic and cultural points of origin, as noted by Damrosch (2003). Chinese contemporary authors counted as those who successfully entered the realm of world literature are the ones translated into foreign (mostly Western) languages: Han Shaogong, Yu Hua, Wang Anyi, Jia Pingwa. An example of upholding this premise is given by Wang Ning (2016), who names the writers mentioned above to counter Wolfgang Kubin’s controversial and critical views of the condition of Chinese contemporary literature (see e.g., interview for *Deutsche Welle* from 2006). Chinese scholars do not seem to oppose that translation-driven dynamic, even if this kind of filtering has been recognized and criticized as a “technology of recognition”

¹ The term “literary system” throughout the whole article is based on the definition put forward by Even-Zohar (1990, 28): “The complex of activities, or any section thereof, for which systemic relations can be hypothesized to support the option of considering them ‘literary’.”

(Shih 2004). Prioritizing writers who managed to publish English or French translations of their work seems to unconsciously favor the idea that we can all agree on one common measure of literary quality. The very same act of translation results in producing very different “worlds” of literary circulation. As soberly noticed by Zhang (2015): “A comparative study of the preferences of Chinese versus Western readers may point to different configurations of the global, the national, and the local in relation to world literature”.

Ling Shuzhen (凌淑珍) and Yang Lin (杨林) combine some “reflections that have weakened hegemony of the Western canon” to counter influential ideas of world literature produced by Moretti (2006) and Casanova (2004). According to Ling and Yang, the world literature system as described by both Moretti and Casanova represents an example of Levinas’ totality, that “swallows up individuality without recognizing true otherness and the significance of internal life” (Ling and Yang 2019). Drawing on Pheng Cheah’s (2016) and Robert Young’s (2013) contributions, they advocate for redefining the world, i.e., to see it as an ongoing process that is being remade rather than a given spatial/geographical entity. Such a dynamic approach sheds more light on the post-colonial perspective, which rejects the world literature map drawn as a cartography of central, semi-peripheral and peripheral regions. Ling and Yang formulate a twofold accusation against Moretti: first, of depriving non-Western experience a chance to express resistance against cultural homogenization and, second, of indifference towards Auerbach’s “diverse background of a common fate” (see, e.g., Mufti 2011). A similar critique, although presented from a different angle, is voiced by Gao Liping (高丽萍), who discussed the legitimacy of the new project of world literature. Gao’s reflections stem from traditional Chinese philosophy and its focus on the relational nature of the world, constant change, and harmony. Such premises, according to Gao, contradict any kind of literary “centers” advocated by Moretti or competition over symbolic power as described by Casanova (Gao 2019).

There are, however, some voices that take less critical stance. Yan Lianke (阎连科), an acclaimed and renowned writer of an ambivalent status in his own country, labels his own writing as “mythorealist” (*shenshi zhuyi* 神现实主义) and analyzes some works of Chinese writers through the mythorealist¹ lens (see Yan 2022). In doing so, he considers foreign

¹ Yan, the proponent of the term, defines it as a literary mode that transcends the truth and conventional realism by including “imaginings, allegories, myths, legends, dreamscapes, and magical transformations that grow out of the soil of daily life and social reality” (Yan 2022, 99).

literature to be indispensable to Chinese writing, yet without giving priority to neither of them¹. Yan's case may hint that artists are less concerned with stating positions assertive to the West than scholars and literary critics. On the other hand, they are visibly less active in discussing "macro-topics" of literature, so they don't offer a significant counterbalance to academia focused on offering more just and more proportional conceptualizations of world literature.

3.3 Proposals for Reframing World Literature

What seems like a widespread pessimism about the current dynamics, represents in fact transformative and reinterpretative potential. Recent years have brought a number of ideas to either reframe world literature or the way Chinese scholars perceive their own literature in relation to the global literary system, even if some of them still include critical diagnosis of Chinese literature. Another equally important element of this reframing is rethinking the tools and forces of literary influence. Parts of this section reveal tension between contention and attachment to the conventional vehicles of recognition.

Wang Ning, very present in most of the debates on contemporary literature in China, has also made contributions to the general theory of world literature. Wang states that world literature has turned from a utopian construct into an aesthetic reality (Wang 2010a, see also, e.g., Wang 2018). He formulates five criteria to establish whether a literary work can be considered a part of world literature:

- 1) The grasp of *Zeitgeist*;
- 2) The ability to create an influence outside its home culture;
- 3) Inclusion in literary anthologies;
- 4) Inclusion in university courses on literature;
- 5) Criticism, discussion and research outside its home culture.

According to Wang, aspects no. 3 and 4 are "relative" while the others are objectively noticeable. The relativity on these two is rooted in fact that the past canonizations of world literature masterpieces happened through intermediary of influential anthologies in the English-

¹ More in-depth analysis of the concept in Machajek and Świątczak-Borowy (2024).

speaking world. Wang's formula might be one of a very few that narrow down its focus to single works of literature as an alternative for discussing global (cultural) power imbalances.

Power relations and macro-mechanisms ruling global cultural economy remain the key themes for reimagining world literature in a more inclusive manner. Fan Jin (范劲), a specialist on German literature and a proponent of a “trans-theoretical” approach toward researching foreign literatures (see, e.g., Fan 2013), borrows the terminology from Luhmann (2000) to describe world literature as a “universalistic communication system” (Fan 2012). Fan presents the following analogy: singular works of literature are like citizens, who are destined by the political power of their source cultures/home states. Contemporary research on world literature is no longer satisfied with the declarative embrace of diversity but rather strives to change the structure of world literature. On the other hand, the growing interest in what Fan calls “Third World literature”¹ is driven by West-centric paradigms. He also points out the contradictory factors of world literature that undermine the potential to voice the perspectives of the underprivileged, such as technological and commercial influences on works' circulation. The same technological and commercial networks deform the initial role of translators as cross-cultural messengers. Fan advocates referring to world literature as the literature devoid of specific locations, instead positioning it “in-between”. In doing so, he points to Bhabha's (2012) concept of hybridity. Fan sees Goethe's idea of world literature as a “new mode of communication”, and current world literature as a moderating principle of a “self-evolving, self-correcting world system.” He goes as far as to claim that world literature does not stem from any specific theory but is being constantly constructed to oppose a certain status quo. Another scholar inspired by Bhabha is Nankin University's (南京大学) Chen Xiaohui (陈晓辉), who reviews this century's first two decades of discussions on world literature (Chen, 2021), and in doing so, he distinguishes four categories of elaborating the notion of world literature: “mechanistic existence” (机制性 *jizhixing*, the “how” of world literature), “substantial existence” (实存性 *shicunxing*, what is world literature), “conceptual existence” (观念性 *guannianxing*, how to deal with world literature) and “hybrid existence” (混杂性 *hunzhexing*,

¹ As noticed by Shi (2016, 27), the term “Third World” has a Cold War provenience and as such may be outdated in reference to contemporary Chinese literature. My use of the term only reflects the fact that it remains present in academic discussions, just like Jameson's idea of Third World literature.

world literature being a “third space” shaping new discursive zones as defined by Bhabha, 2012).

Suzhou University’s Professor Fang Hanwen (方汉文) is known for leading the National Social Science Fund of China’s project on “a Chinese interpretation of the new construction of the history of world literature” (Hao 2013). In 2016, he has put forward the idea of the “Sinicization” of world literature (Fang 2016). Rather than offer some substantial change to the existing system, Fang advocates building a China-oriented theoretical system to interpret the totality of local literatures. The system is based on six regional sub-systems, which may remind of Huntington’s widely contested major civilizations that are bound to clash at some point. Fang seems aware of similarities yet claims that division serves only the purpose of “systemic research”. The idea is not completely new, however. The existence of a “multipolar” structure of the world literature landscape was put forward earlier by Ma Hanguang (马汉广) (Ma 2013). These two contributions show how the paradigms of literary studies and international relations may intertwine, leading to ambiguous outcomes: on one hand interdisciplinary and of a non-obvious range, on the other – susceptible to accusations of straightforward politicization.

Reframing World Literature is also a matter of redrawing the new maps of literary influence and reimagining the new ways of literary recognition. Both acts, one rather oriented towards the past, while the other – towards the future, constitute the conceptual basis of the repositioning of China. Wang Ning, in the same article from 2010 that lists the five criteria of a work being a part of world literature, also discusses the reasons behind the lack of recognition for Chinese literature on the global scene: prejudices toward China, low quality and quantity of translations, and the specifics of consumerist markets, which are not welcoming towards pre-modern Chinese literature. As for contemporary literature, Wang believes it to be shaped by Western tradition, therefore Chinese authors’ writing cannot offer any originality and novelty to Western readers. Not all scholars, however, share the same pessimistic view of Chinese literary material. Zhang Rongxing (张荣兴) revisits the notion of “national allegory” (Zhang et. al. 2013, see also in Ling and Yang, 2019), which, according to Frederic Jameson, is an ever-present element of the so-called Third World literature (see in Jameson, 1986). Zhang believes that textualizing history and turning it into narratives, seen as a key part of creating “national allegories”, inspires the transformative potential to further establish the diversity of the world literature landscape.

Yet diagnosis given by Wang Ning creates a tension between marginalization and recognition. The anxiety over the consequences of far-reaching penetration of Western writing are ambivalent. The ambivalence is caused by the tendency to equate presence within the realm of literature with canonization; in that view, recognition is achieved mostly (if not solely) by producing authors who become “classics” and win internationally recognized awards. Mo Yan’s (莫言) Nobel Prize in 2012 represents a breaking point for many Chinese scholars and the evidence of Chinese literature’s significance. Such a view is voiced by many scholars and critics in the PRC (see, e.g., Zhang 2014, Yang 2014, Meng 2018). For similar reasons, Chinese science-fiction is seen as the next driving force of “worlding” Chinese literature. After an enormous success of Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem* (三体), the new wave of Chinese sci-fi “brought China to the center stage of world literature” (Song 2022). This entrance is happening through “negotiations”, since the very genre of science fiction can be seen as “foreign” to Chinese authors, such as Liu Cixin, Chen Qiufan or Han Song (ibid.). Another factor that speaks in favor of Chinese sci-fi is its flexibility to integrate with large-scale industrialization of literature and the technological impacts on reading (Wang 2011).

The sense of marginalization may also arise from a one-sided interpretation of literary history. Professor Chen Sihe (陈思和) of Fudan University (复旦大学) is the proponent of searching for global elements (世界性因素 *shijixing yinsu*) in Chinese literature (refer to, e.g., Chen 2001, Chen 2022). In the first decade of the 21st century, the notion has gained some traction among Chinese literary scholars (see, e.g., Peng 2009). Chen shares the initial premise with Moretti, that verifying cultural influences through conventional textual research is, in the current age, no longer possible (Chen 2022, 12). Yet, according to Chen, literary creation remains “relatively independent” in terms of development, which stands in stark contrast with Moretti’s idea of the literary world-system. Chen’s idea is to place all the research on specific elements of the country’s contemporary literature (e.g., feminine consciousness or romanticism) against the global context. A somewhat similar approach is presented by Zhu Jianguo (朱建国), who makes an attempt to reinterpret the literary developments of the last hundred years (with the special focus on the 4th May Movement) of Chinese literature (Zhu 2022). Referring to the general rise of the academic debate over world literature, as well as Franco Moretti’s idea of central, semi-peripheral and peripheral areas of literary production (Moretti 2006), Zhu proposes to refer to literature of the Republican period not in terms of “influence”, but rather “reply” to the novelties from the outside.

The forward-looking approach in the quest for recognition is presented by Wang Ning (2018), who appropriates Tu Wei-ming's (杜维明) notion of cultural China¹ (Tu 1991) to expand the presence of Chinese literature on the global landscape. Interestingly, in the same work, he refers to contemporary Chinese novels as a product of “glocalization” of the outside influences, which are labelled in wide strokes as “Western”. The framework of glocalization comes back in an interview given to Sichuan University's (四川大学)² Zhang Cha (张叉) (Zhang and Wang 2021). In such an optic, they believe that Chinese literature is just “another version of world literature” which contributes to dispersing a West-centric way of discussing world literature.

Chinese scholars do not hesitate to rely on both foreign and interdisciplinary contributions to challenge inherent biases and power imbalances within the global literary system. Nearly all the contributions introduced above note correlation between recognition within the world literature system and power. While many of them voice criticism toward the West-centric orientation of world literature, some, such as Fan Jin, Fang Hanwen or Chen Sihe, propose original contributions to “redefine the map”. Most of these ideas, however, are still waiting to become “discovered” outside the Chinese debates. Regardless of how underexplored they remain, these discussions highlight an evolving and increasingly self-assured Chinese perspective on global literary discourse.

4. Marxism: grasp the old to bring the new

Marxism occupies the dominant and mainstream position in China's intellectual life, and according to the official orthodoxy, it guides the “scientific criticism of literary and art works” (Zhang 2017, 15). As summarized by Wan Na (万娜), one of China's well-known researcher on Marxist literary theory: “When contemporary Chinese literary criticism [...] starts self-construction, ideological criticism is more and more popular for its theoretical value and vitality, its correspondence with Chinese traditional culture, and its relevance to Marxism” (Wan 2020,

¹ The three dimensions of this notion are: first, Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan; second, the Overseas Chinese and, third, everyone with a long-term interest in China and Chinese culture.

² The affiliation is worth mentioning here, since Sichuan University is known for its research in comparative literature, led by Professor Cao Shunqing (曹顺庆). Zhang Cha is an example of this direction.

106). The sustained presence of Marxist frameworks makes it a critical language, very relatable to recalibrating the position of Chinese literature as a part of world literature.

Given its institutional dominance, it is unsurprising that Chinese scholars continue to engage with Marxist readings of world literature, drawing from both classical and contemporary sources. The articulation of world literature put forward by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *Communist Manifesto* is highly influential among PRC scholars. This formulation, which is one of the initial conceptualizations of world literature, remains the main reference point despite the huge volume of Marxist theoretical elaborations that have been made both in China and abroad. Quite naturally, Marx and Marxism are often referenced in research focused on Xi Jinping Thought, colonialism, etc., which are covered in other parts of this review.

The role of capitalism in literature and shaping cultural tendencies is met with various responses. Zhou and Tong (2003) see literary world space as defined by Western capitalism shaping the spiritual production, which directly references Marx and Engels' notion of world literature (Marx and Engels 1848), while Yao (2007) goes as far as dashing any ideas of integrating Chinese and global culture as "unprecedented lies". In Yao's understanding, the particularity and universality are impossible to reconcile, since the "universal" brought by globalization is, in fact, an instrument of Western hegemony.

Not all Marxist elaborations focus on the resistance against Western paradigms. A strong "utopian orientation", somewhat echoing Marx's historical determinism is represented by Dong Xuewen (董学文), Professor of Peking University (北京大学), aesthetician and literary scholar active since the late 1960s, who sees a parallel between contributing to the history of progress and moving world literature forward (He et al. 2013). Such vision predestines Chinese literature to become more visible in the world as both inevitable and desirable, since the process is correlated with the country's ability to shape the future.

Some scholars aim to expand Marxist literary thought, so it addresses the new framework of literary studies. Tan Cheng (谭成) offered perhaps the most interesting proposal to advance Marx's notion of world literature (Tan 2015). Taking *Communist Manifesto* as a starting point, he distinguishes two kinds of world literature: the capitalist (the actual state of affairs) and the communist (the potential one). To theoretically support the latter, he borrows the basic notions of Alain Badiou's philosophy and calls for the confrontational character of the new literary works, so they do not become "compromised imperial literature". Another two-sided distinction is proposed by Jiang Chengyong (蒋承勇), a prominent scholar focused on Western literary

traditions, who discussed world literature as the desired destination and “literary cosmopolitanism”, being the failed attempt of world literature (2018). Jiang presents a representative view among Chinese scholars that comparative literature, despite many elaborations on the discipline’s crisis or even “death” (Spivak 2003), guards literary research from homogenization. He also refers to the future global literary scene as a “community of human aesthetics”, which echoes Xi Jinping’s call for a “community with a shared future for humankind”. Shang Biwu (尚必武), a highly regarded narratologist, criticizes Western scholars, who “admit Marx’s role in defining world literature, but rarely follow the potential contribution coming from his ideas” (Shang 2019). He also claims that the contemporary logic of capital is “irreconcilably contradictory to the traditional cultures”, and it is Chinese writers’ and scholars’ responsibility to protect those cultures. Wang Ning believes that Marxist literary theory should serve global goals as a default solution and he refers to it as a “travelling theory” moving from a widely defined West to China, so it may influence the whole world after refinement in the process of “Chinese practice” (2020). This “Chinese practice” references the long tradition of reclaiming Marx, and effectively Sinicizing the set of theories (since there is no “single Marxism”) that aim for universality.

Literary theorists in China still acclaim Marxism and research how it can be seen as a shaping force of world literature, both in historical and critical perspectives. The keywords discussed within the spectrum of Marxist theory, such as globalization, “literary cosmopolitanism”, homogenization, etc., point to the attempts to strike the balance between universal aspirations of world literature and the need to uphold one’s own literary voice, resonant with China’s cultural roots. Perhaps paradoxically, Marxism is sometimes used to call for cultural preservation, which does not contradict a strong belief in its potential to shape the interpretations and critique of world literature.

5. Community with a Shared Future for World Literature – Introducing Xi Jinping’s Thought into World Literature Discourse

Xi Jinping’s ascendance to power was followed by a series of theoretical ideas which openly abandoned the country’s previous, modest strategy of *taoguang yanghui* 韬光养晦 – “keeping a low profile and biding one’s time.” Xi’s China is more assertive and noticeably more present in the world; this article does not aim to analyze political shifts of the past decade, but rather draw the attention to the fact that some of the notions coined by the current General Secretary of CCP undeniably entered the literary discourse of China. Reducing their popularity to the side-effect of the political climate may oversimplify the theoretical potential noticed by Chinese

scholars. Some of Xi's catchphrases aim to motivate the internal (Chinese) actors: China Dream 中国梦 *Zhongguo meng*, "telling Chinese story well" 讲好中国故事 *jiang hao Zhongguo gushi*,¹ while others are more cross-cultural, universal or striving to reshape current international structures, e.g., "community with a shared future for humankind" 人类命运共同体 *renlei mingyun gongtongti*. In terms of literary theory, the strength of these ambiguous proposals could lie (supposedly) in repositioning Chinese literature within the realm of world literature, as well as rebalancing power relations within global culture. Comments on Xi's Thought are paired with an acute awareness that Chinese theories on art lack innovation, influence and discourse power (话语权 *huayuquan*), even if that state of affairs is not related to the quality of literature itself (Jin 2018).

All these ideas are interconnected or even interdependent. It is extremely rare, perhaps even impossible to encounter scholarly discourse that implements only one of Xi's notions without relying on, or at least mentioning the others. Yang Yuhua (杨玉华), for example, claims that forming the "community of world literary theory" goes along with the Chinese dream of China's great rejuvenation (Yang 2021), and resolves the problem of "aphasia" (a term proposed and popularized by Cao Shunqing, see Cao 2017) tormenting China's literary theory, and breaks away with the inevitable course of Western discourse hegemony.

It is worth noting, however, that long before formulating any of Xi Jinping's slogans, during the international conference "Contemporary World Literature and China" held in 2009 in Beijing, Tong Qingbing (童庆炳), who mentored a number of the well-known figures from China's literary circles e.g. Liu Xiaobo (刘晓波) and Mo Yan, when discussing a literary landscape of Chinese literature in the 20th century, presented a contrary, pessimistic view on "worldliness" of Chinese writers, stating that they lack the qualities to move beyond their closest circle of influence (Liu and Zhang, 2009). Such a view was representative of a fear of the "aphasia" felt among China's literary circles.² Xi Jinping Thought has played a part in

¹ "Telling China's story" is targeted at the outside audiences but the most direct tasks required to fulfill the goal are first assigned to the Chinese actors.

² The term is mainly used when debating lack of international influence of China's theory (mostly literary), yet it seems very fitting to the wider concerns which also involved writers and critics.

reversing the trend and putting *cultural confidence* (文化自信) high on the agenda of discussions on the national and global culture.

Researching literary critique and research commenting on Xi Jinping's proposals often requires sifting through propagandist eulogies and snappy comments that very much echo the "main melody" (主旋律 *zhu xuanlü*). Professor Zeng Siyi (曾思艺) of Tianjin Normal University (天津师范大学), a comparatist specialized in Russian Literature, for example, points to the fact that China is a part of the world literature landscape by saying that "world literature does not belong to any specific nation, but it is spiritual wealth of whole humanity" (Zeng 2022). This is perhaps one of the most illustrative examples of a parallel between argumentation presented by literary scholars and state media or officials, who comment in the same manner on democracy or human rights¹.

In general, redefining world literature with the notions put forward by Xi aims to lead Chinese culture back to global centrality. The first recognizable pattern is countering the West-centric mindset in literature and theory, which is quite often voiced in stronger terms than in research covered in Section 3 of this review. The premise for that is the belief that Chinese literature no longer needs outside (Western) acknowledgement (Gu 2018, Meng 2018), and some of this critique involves anticolonial subtones (e.g., Jin 2018). Shanghai University's (上海大学) Professor Hao Yu (郝雨), an active critic and columnist, believes that using the idea of the Community of Common Destiny in literary theory and practice will help to get out of "the trap of Western discursive system monopoly that has lasted nearly a hundred years" (Hao 2019). This view is supported by Chen Zhongyi (陈众议), who criticizes "Occident orientation" in approaching the literary history of contemporary Chinese literature (Chen 2021). Yang Yuhua believes that the world community of literary theory urgently needs to get familiar with modern transformations of China's premodern literary concepts. The same scholar claims that the widely coveted "World Literary Theory Community" fulfills the ideal of *Weltliteratur* imagined by Goethe (Yang 2021).

¹ An example of the same pattern, when discussing democracy: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/xi-biden-knock-off-democracy-vs-autocracy-talk-2022-11-14/> (accessed: December 3, 2022) and human rights: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202206/16/WS62aa7ad3a310fd2b29e62f86.html> (accessed: December 3, 2022).

Conceptualizations of “Chinese story” or “telling Chinese story well” can be roughly divided into a more open approach and one that is more self-oriented. Regardless of the stance presented, some Chinese scholars and critics consider the task to be of utmost importance. As a young Nanjing-based critic Fang Yan (方岩) puts it, “Chinese story” means the process of entering a fictional realm, which may be significant in searching for identity in the “Omnimedia era”¹ (Fang 2016).

By “open approach”, I mean a relatively greater willingness to function in a literary system that constantly seeks interaction with others, rather than to serve to present the hand-picked aspects of the Chinese experience. As for this approach, Shanghai Party Institute of CPC’s (中共上海市委党校) Huang Lizhi (黄力之) claims in a reductive manner that telling “a good Chinese story” is equal to the act of worlding Chinese literature (Huang 2022). In quite a different, more ambitious tone, Zhang Yiwu (张颐武), a political advisor and a professor of Chinese studies at Peking University (北京大学) believes that only if Chinese literature manages to expand the scope and possibilities of world literature, will it live up to the name of “Chinese story” (Zhang 2014). Another interesting angle is given by Liu et al. (2018), who see writing Chinese subjectivity as a way to change reality shaped by Western norms. Zhao Zhiyi (赵志义) and Ni Fan (倪帆) analyze Goethe’s economic vocabulary in his musings over world literature (with the use of terms such as “exchange”, “wealth”, and “commodity”) to link the first 150 years of developing the concept of world literature with Eurocentrism and capitalism (Zhao and Ni 2022). They propose a “world literary system with Chinese characteristics”, which, unsurprisingly, relies on a “community with a shared future for humankind” – “diverse and equal” field of civilizations, mutually exchanging and learning from each other.

“Self-orientation of Chinese story” stems from the premise that the local literature already has everything it needs to be recognized and more prominent. Li Ping (李萍) argues that the primary responsibility of Chinese literature is to “vividly depict” the overall picture of Chinese society by employing realist techniques and conventions (Li 2017). Chen Xiaoming (陈晓明), Peking University scholar and recognized expert on Chinese contemporary avant-garde literature admits that, in general, Chinese literature in the past decades switched its focus

¹ The most common translation of 全媒时代 *quanmei shidai*, a term used by Chinese media.

toward the individual, which he believes to be an influence of world literature. In his view, “Chinese story” means coming back to “grand narratives and grand history” (Chen 2016).

Similar voices can be heard when analyzing the elaborations of the “Chinese Dream” and its relation to world literature. The more open-minded attitude is presented by Peng Cheng (彭程), an author, editor, and critic, who claims that as long as literature maintains high quality (without being specific on the term) the Chinese dream is “bound to be fulfilled”, and literature can draw from any worthwhile form or influence (Peng 2014). Wang Wenzhang (王文章), the director of Chinese National Academy of Arts (中国艺术研究院), believes that Chinese literature should depict “cultural self-confidence and pursuit of Chinese dream” and in doing so “it will constantly reshape the spirit of world literature” (Wang 2014).

In general, combining Xi Jinping’s Thought with world literature leads to conceptualizing the latter as a “destination realm”, that is primarily dominated by Western theories and narratives, but destined to be reshaped. Notions such as “community with a shared future for humankind”, “Chinese story” or “telling Chinese story well” serve as a framework for literature and, in a way, guidelines to follow. In this setting, literature has a set of defined goals, which can be widely related to achieving the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. This new, politically charged direction opens a new chapter in Chinese debates on universalism and particularism. The notion of universalism was for some time treated with distrust, seen as a tool of “literary gatekeeping” mechanism. Xi Jinping’s thought encourages the new ideas of engagement. What could be exceptional about Chinese literary theory, in this new setting, is the new set of perspectives on the meaning of “global” and “universal” in terms of contemporary literature.

6. Conclusions

World literature has become an extensive concept of immense mobility and influence, which makes it an example of Said’s “travelling theory” (1983, 226). What is encouraging for the future of this area of study is that the circulation of the notion contributes to its further gains in strength. How the idea is discussed and reinterpreted mirrors the self-perception of the (f)actors within the local literary system. The frameworks and the most-discussed dimensions of world literature in China show readiness to become, as Wang Ning (Wang 2022, 84) puts it, a “theory-producing country.” Such an approach also reflects the awareness of the past dominance of Western paradigms, yet Chinese scholars do not turn their back on the most recent theoretical

contributions in world literature discourse, no matter the point of origin. Apart from the “pure” critical/literary approach, there is a visible commitment to combining world literature with ideas of political provenience. It might be both straightforward, as in introducing Xi Jinping Thought into the debates on world literature, or more subtle, as in discussing a multipolar global literary landscape. However, countering the West-centric paradigms has become a part of the heterogenous and pluralistic mainstream of literary theory, regardless of local socio-political conditions. Having said that, the idea of characterizing the general picture shown in this review as the “repositioning of China” is a tentative proposal.

In 2009, at the Frankfurt Book Fair, yet-to-become Nobel Prize Laureate Mo Yan expressed his hopes for Chinese literature to “one day [...] inspire and influence [...] some young Western writers” (Mo 2010). As for the theoretical dimension, Wang Ning, quite often quoted here, writes about the current “rare opportunities” for Chinese theorists to move from a “theory-consuming country” to a more active and influential role (2022, 84). According to Wang, such a trajectory is possible only via the agency of Western/English-speaking academia (ibid.). The other possibility, however, for Chinese literary theory is to function as a “regional world literature theory” and shape its influence within, to paraphrase Thornber (2014, 463), “theory contact nebulae”, quite in a similar way East Asian Literature is conceptualized as “regional world literature” Regardless which one is the case, this review hopes to expand our knowledge of how the notion of world literature is framed and perceived within different literary systems. Whether Chinese (re)interpretations of world literature keywords and notions will reframe the international debate, the jury is still out.

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What is happening to the ‘Chinese school’ of comparative literature? Comparatist approach countered by World Literature discourse

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Abstract:

At the turn of the century, the aspirations to establish the ‘Chinese school’ of comparative literature received a warm welcome in Mainland China. In recent years, however, academic debate on the school has waned. This decline may partly result from a renewed focus on World Literature. This article aims to describe the evolution of the ‘Chinese school’ of comparative literature in the 21st century. This initial overview presents the most prominent theoretical patterns. It examines the intersection of Chinese theoretical discourse with World Literature studies and its impact on Western literary theory.

Abstrakt:

Na przełomie wieków propozycja utworzenia “chińskiej szkoły komparatystyki literackiej” spotkała się z ciepłym przyjęciem w Chinach kontynentalnych. W ostatnich latach entuzjazm ten wydaje się jednak mniej zauważalny. Porzucenie pomysłu może być pokłosiem przeniesienia ciężaru dyskusji w kierunku problematyki literatury światowej.

Niniejszy artykuł stawia sobie za zadanie opis i ocenę rozwoju „chińskiej szkoły” komparatystyki literackiej w XXI wieku. Zarys ten prezentuje najważniejsze i najszerzej komentowane próby stworzenia ram teoretycznych, przy okazji relacjonując główne trendy w chińskim dyskursie w obszarach literatury światowej oraz przekształceń zachodniej teorii literatury.

Keywords: ‘Chinese school’ of comparative literature, comparative literature, World Literature

Słowa kluczowe: “Chińska szkoła” komparatystyki literackiej, komparatystyka literacka, literatura światowa, *World Literature*

Introduction

Comparative literature nowadays finds itself in a position of ambivalence. Some believe it is overshadowed by more fashionable discourses of World Literature and post-colonial studies (Czapliński 2014). Others revoke a grave declaration by Spivak, who announced *the death of a discipline* (2003) in its hitherto state. This diagnosis is widely quoted and often paired with a proposal to revive comparative literature in a new fashion. The debates increasingly link comparative literature with studies on World Literature and view the updated paradigm of the discipline as “the revival of World Literature in the era of globalization” (X. Lin 2020). On the other hand, comparative literature is thriving outside old Western “centres”, far from Casanova’s (2004) “Greenwich meridian of literature”. The number of publications in Chinese, Arabic, and Indian is still remarkable (He and Shuang, 2015). In fact, comparative literature in China is considered an important part of the so-called new-liberal arts movement (新文科运动 *xīn wénkē yùndòng*), which aims to develop uniquely Chinese theoretical contributions (Ye 2022). Does this prove Spivak’s claims wrong? Perhaps we are witnessing a radical reconfiguration of the discipline that she called for. If so, do they have a chance to hold up against the prevailing discourse of World Literature?

This article aims to present some of the most prominent theoretical patterns of the “Chinese School of Comparative Literature” (中国比较文学学派 *Zhōngguó bǐjiào wénxué xuépai*) in the 21st century. The idea was most enthusiastically discussed at the turn of the century, hence the proposed framework. Another question posed by the article is that of the wider applicability of the Chinese school in the realm of World Literature. After all, “comparative” was initially set against “national” (Bassnett 1993), so any new comparative elaborations should offer theoretical solutions that transcend local tradition and cultural contexts.

After introducing the objectives of this paper, I briefly present the initial proposals for establishing the new school of comparative literature. Then I show the theoretical pillars that were mostly set up in the last decade of the 20th century to finally reach the point of my main interest i.e., the current state of the ongoing debate. While doing so, I try to provide some critical reactions to the recent developments and define the standpoint towards World Literature presented by the Chinese school of comparative literature. Undoubtedly, the immanent “shadow” of Western theory remains an important reference point throughout my work.

Cultural communication and academic exchanges between China and the outside world fall into a spectrum of two structures: a “neutral” standing of comparison and the “subjective” standpoint of stimulation-reaction dynamics. While the former considers the influx of (mostly) Western ideas a normal and rather harmless phenomenon, the latter emphasizes the potential Westernization of China and regards that risk as a starting point for analyzing foreign theories from a Chinese perspective (Zeng 2018). I consider this tension a useful framework for my analysis.

Theoretical elaborations on a set of local literary theories have been also driven by the anxiety over “aphasia”, a concept introduced by Cao Shunqing (Cao 1995). The term is usually defined as a disability to establish intellectual subjectivity that leads to questioning China’s modern cultural identity or serves as a warning against “the literary foreignization of Chinese culture” (X. Zhou 2006). Aphasia is even referenced as an “initial period of Chinese literary discourse transformation towards innovation” (Cao and Gao 2017). Perhaps, as noted by Dan and Zhou, an alarming sense of crisis was in a way inevitable – but for “Westernization of literary theory in China”, provided that it actually took place, Chinese comparatists wouldn’t have had a well-developed framework for critically analyzing their own traditions (Shen and Zhou 2006). Aphasia in its broader meaning used to hover over the debates between opposite tendencies in Chinese academia: nativism versus westernization, tradition versus modernization, and already mentioned “neutral comparison” against “stimuli-reaction” approach towards the outside influences (Cao and Gao 2017). According to McDougall (1993), a similar dynamic was observed in literary practice: she would refer to it as “the anxiety of out-fluence”, but also “the quest for the correct”, or “the fallacy of the *Zeitgeist*” (Y. Zhang 2015).

The initial iterations

Although I do not aim to fully review the historical development of the school, a brief introduction may serve as a useful starting point. The term “Chinese School” was first proposed in Taiwan by Gu Tianhong and Chen Huihua in 1976 and soon gained interest in Hong Kong (Lin and Huang 2015). Initially more of a manifesto than a theory, it later developed into a structured approach in the 1990s. In a wider sense, Chinese contributions in the field of comparative literature could be interpreted as a part of implementing the developmental mode of “stepping into the world” (走向世界 *zǒuxiàng shìjiè*) that involved not only literary works but also literature studies. Scholars sought to balance Western theories with Chinese

perspectives, emphasizing cross-cultural studies (Cao 1996), a “holistic method” and search for “an equal dialogue with the West” (Shen 2002). The proposal rarely implied the superiority of Chinese culture or “Chineseness”, but rather aimed to save local scholarship from turning into an unconscious form of “knowledge colonialism” (Lin and Huang 2015)

¹. Another factor that encouraged Chinese scholars to set the foundations for a new comparative school was a “severe separation in China of comparative theory from practice” (Cao 2013). Despite these efforts, around the turn of century Chinese comparative literature was still criticized for being overly “self-referential” (Zhou and Tong 2003).

As for the methodological basis, Cao (2000) noted that Chinese School is “going to construct” its pillars through:

1. The Illumination Approach: encourages cross-cultural studies;
2. The Approach of Comparison and Contraction between the like and the unlike;
3. The Archetypal Approach which explores the “national symptoms” and the cultural *arche*;
4. The Dialogue Approach which fosters two-way exchanges between East and West;
5. The Approach of integrative construction which aims at the reconstruction of general poetics.

Those were the initial proposals, that were later developed by the very same scholar, pushing Chinese comparative literature towards new territories, perhaps even to “the third stage of comparative literature” (Cao 2011).

The variation theory: the Chinese school grows into maturity

The most significant development of the Chinese school of comparative literature is the variation theory put forward by Cao Shunqing. Some initial inspirations, at least in wording, may be drawn from Franco Moretti, who perceives World Literature as a “system of variations”

¹ On the other hand, Cao Shunqing along with Lei Wang state that “Chinese Comparative Literature is based in the context of cultural conflicts between China and the West” (Cao and Wang 2009) which points to a more confrontational use of the new approach or to some loosely expressed belief in the “clash of civilizations”, as conceptualized by Samuel Huntington.

(Moretti 2000). It is worth noting, however, that some scholars before Cao used the notion of variations in their research (T. Xie 1999).

Introducing the variation theory is defined as an exact moment of forming the theoretical framework of the Chinese school. Such framing equals the informal school with proponents of the variation theory (Meng 2017). The premise of the variation is that, along with the globalization process, comparative theory has moved toward interest in researching works from different civilizational systems, unlike the American and French Schools (Ping 2017).

The Variation theory's is based on the following assumptions:

1. Comparative literature should move from sameness/similarity towards difference/variability.
2. The Variation theory seeks to discover laws of literary variations.
3. There are four different levels of variations:
 - a. cross-national variation;
 - b. interlingual variation;
 - c. intercultural variation;
 - d. cross-civilization variation (Cao and Han 2017).

In many areas, the Chinese school advocates a more dynamic approach than previous schools that mostly focused on Influence (French School) and Parallel (American School) studies. For example, cross-national variations in Cao's theory are related to the imagology that goes beyond literary representations and delves into broader social collective imagery (*ibid.*). A significant aspect is interlingual variation, which is closely connected to media-translatology, often mistaken with translation studies (Zhuang and Pi 2017). The former is a cultural perspective on the study of translation, which recognizes that "the translation of foreign literature is not only the transformation between two languages but also the translator's translation (understanding, acceptance, and interpretation) towards people, society, and nature that is reflected in the book" (Cao 2013). A key notion of media-translatology is creative treason. The terms refers to the acts of "communication, collision, misunderstanding, and distorted interpretation between cultures" (*ibid.*). Intercultural variations stand at a higher level of complexity and examine cultural norms influence literary circulation and safeguard the target culture. Cross-civilizational variations, the most comprehensive category, focus on broad literary interaction on a global scale. In a way, they represent the belief shared by many Chinese scholars that comparative literature is far from

dead. It is, in fact, thriving and evolving into a more inclusive discipline. The emphasis on the plurality of civilizations expressed by advocates of the variation theory may hint at cultural essentialism. The idea of cross-civilization variations is based on the premise that the post-West-centric comparative literature draws its energy from exploring civilizational heterogeneity, usually expressed within the East-West duality.

Interest in translational aspects of global text circulation has been a well-established feature of both China's comparative and World Literature discourse. Redefining the role of translation within the field points to the awareness of China still being an object of the "technologies of recognition". This notion, proposed by Shih Shu-mei, involves "the granting of universality to the exceptional particular", as well as an imbalance between the West as an agent of recognition and "the rest" as the object of representation (Shih 2004); in simpler terms, it describes how the West determines literary legitimacy while positioning non-Western works as objects rather than agents of literary discourse. Such a perspective is reinforced by the fact that not only Nobel recipients working in the Chinese language but also other acclaimed writers: Yu Hua, Liu Cixin, Wang Anyi, Can Xue, and Yan Lianke, just to name a few, all made their way to the global scene through translations to European languages. Furthermore, only the works that managed to earn recognition from readers of English translations are analyzed as examples of World Literature. Some scholars, however, accept this reality: Wang Ning admits that English serves nowadays as the *lingua franca* and believes that translating Chinese text to English to be a "prime undertaking" (N. Wang 2013).

Reception and Critique

China, West, World Literature, and "aphasia"

Both variation theory and cross-civilization research have developed into a separate branch of study and have gained prominence in Chinese comparative literature (Zhao 2018). However, despite a well-developed theoretical framework by Cao Shunqing, the Chinese school have not been spared critical comments, often recalling the spectre of aphasia. Some voices went as far as to call the school "an inverted form of aphasia" (Shen and Zhou 2006), while others pointed out impracticality and lack of substance (Zhou and Tong 2003).

One way to address these concerns is to expand the discipline's research scope. In fact, media-translatology and imagology proposed by the Chinese school welcome interdisciplinary studies, triggering further concerns about reducing the discipline into a subsection of cultural studies. However, Moore argues that, in the Chinese context, the interdisciplinary approach is a "natural" way to study literature (Moore 2013).

China has managed to move away from being threatened by "knowledge colonialism" to the stage of high "cultural confidence", which enables her to reshape the field of comparative literature and World Literature. Western discourses introduced in China must gain recognition from Chinese academia first, and that process of filtering and adapting turns outside influences into parts of local theory (Shen 2002). It is worth noting that the country's effort to increase its imprint in humanities goes hand in hand with China's general strategic intent to rearrange the international stage. "Community of human destiny" – a vision articulated by China's paramount leader Xi Jinping – aims to "break through the stereotype of cultural centralism". This perspective seeks to bring forward an organic combination of cultural differences and convergences on a global scale (Li 2022).

It is not rare to bring the perspective of China-West duality only to underline the need to make this simplified division obsolete. Wang (2004) admits that along with globalization, theory travels from the West-as-center to the non-West-as-periphery. This claim echoes Moretti's theory of world-system, but Wang takes its initial assumption further and calls for a two-way street to "globalize" the discipline.

Although the Sino-Western binary setting is gradually being discarded (in terms of literary theory), it remains an influential reference point in academic debates. This polarity, if applied too rigidly, is highly problematic, and the risk has been noted. Recent decades have seen "Western theory" largely shaped by non-Western¹ postcolonial scholars (Fusco 2006), just to mention the above-mentioned Spivak. What is more, Chinese literary theory nowadays operates within a transnational and globalized context that transcends simple bipolarity. Deconstruction of the West-centric studies requires acknowledging the challenges ahead. Zhang Longxi (2009) – one of China's foremost comparatists – points to the confrontation between the East and West caused by nationalism, as well as the politicization of research and

¹ I am aware of the potential implications of referring to the vast areas of the world as "non-Western". My aim is not to reinforce the otherization of "the Rest", the wording follows the way specific phrases have been put forward by other scholars.

literature. In recent years, Chinese scholars have framed China as a theoretical problem requiring a separate and tailored approach. Influenced by World Literature discourse, they have shifted from an antagonism of “China and the world” (中国与世界 *Zhōngguó yǔ shìjiè*) to a more holistic idea of “China of the world” (世界的中国 *Shìjiè de Zhōngguó*) (Liu 2021).

China embraced the idea of World Literature even on institutional levels, founding the World Literature Association in 2011, yet the discourse on World Literature still suffers from West-East imbalance and lacks “transformative innovations” (J. Zhou 2017). On the other hand, there are claims that the dualistic structure of World-China, also referred to as “influencer–influenced”, is no longer accurate, since World Literature has become a common undertaking, not to mention the fact that Chinese literature is entitled to equal standing (Chen 2000). Chinese comparative literature, according to some scholars, also stems from a specific experience of China’s development, it is “not a branch of Western comparative literature, [...] but an inherent requirement of the development of Chinese literature and an inevitable result of China’s economic, political, social, and cultural development” (Yue and Wang 2006).

The rekindled enthusiasm for new ideas in the field of comparative literature expressed by Chinese scholars does not contradict hopes placed in World Literature. Some interpretations seem unfazed by a lack of a consensual definition of World Literature, which torments the debate, as claimed by Moretti (2006). World Literature, even without a specific theoretical framework, may serve as a founding idea, a final goal or a paradigm that helps to deconstruct Western cultural monopoly (Lu 2017). The deconstructionist approach roots back to John J. Deeney’s objectives of the Chinese School, which sought to promote non-Western literatures and represent non-Western countries (Deeney 1998). Wang Ning, one of the most prominent literary scholars in China, also considers World Literature a new direction for the discipline in a predicament. His belief in cross-cultural, cross-civilizational and cross-disciplinary research as an outcome of globalization reveals his endorsement of the variation theory (Wang, 2005). Widening the presence of China within the realm of World Literature remains an important undertaking to reshape the country’s image. The argument that “the image of China is easier to exploit than the realities of China” indirectly points to the relevance of the variation theory (Eoyang 2013). There is also a belief in World Literature as a tool to face the contradictions produced by neoliberalism and neocolonialism. Goethe’s initial proposition of the term *Weltliterature* (World Literature) is often analyzed by Chinese scholars. His “mode of thinking” is considered useful thanks to seeing “other ways of being human, other modes of making sense, and other possibilities of organizing social life” (S. Xie 2018).

Another theoretical problem of Chinese literature as part of World Literature is related to the recent proposals of enlarging the former category into “Sinophone literature”¹. There are two main, opposing views of the “Sinophone”. One, “post-loyalism”, focuses on associations (be they positive or negative) with China’s cultural heritage (D. Wang 2014), while the other opposes any sense of submission towards any cultural or political centre, putting emphasis on diaspora in an independent position (Shih 2004). The idea partly addresses the ongoing question of what it means for Chinese literature to be global (Sim 2019). It opens up a whole new set of possible implications since it invites the transcultural context of literature written in Chinese that, as Damrosch suggests, “is already there” (Damrosch 2007). Although many of these ideas come from Mainland China scholars, and the scope of “Sinophone” may go beyond that research, I believe that it is worth noting as a potential and promising direction both for Chinese comparative literature and discussions on China and Chineseness within World Literature. The multicultural nature of Sinophone writing could also present a new challenge for the variation theory promoted by the Chinese school.

Conclusion

To conclude, Chinese scholars have followed the overall trend of recognizing that comparative literature had found itself in a state of crisis. Yet their engagement in diagnosing this predicament took a creative path, mainly through the Chinese school of comparative literature. This phenomenon should not only be viewed in relation to global trends in academia but also considered within the specific context of Chinese scholars rethinking their connections to the outside, mostly Western, theory. While the balance between neutral comparison and focus on “action-reaction” analysis is not fixed, the feeling of doom known as “aphasia” has become a thing of the past, and the fear of Westernizing theory in China seems much less present. Support for Western theory is often combined with efforts to localize foreign ideas to better reflect not only Chinese experience and practice but also to represent the perspectives from historically peripheral regions. Comparative literature is now considered a significant discipline in humanities, increasingly leaning towards theories that originate from China. Some of the ideas from the last decade of the past century have evolved into full theoretical elaborations,

¹ Although the topic is mostly known by this name, there are also suggestions for a homogenizing move to call it “New Han-language writing” (Huang 2013).

the variation theory being the most notable example. This search for the differences on both textual, national or even civilizational levels draws the attention of scholars both inside and outside China and inspires new approaches in related fields such as translation studies and cultural studies.

This article initially suggested that World Literature discourse overshadowed interest in comparative literature, adversely influencing the Chinese school. This hypothesis seems inaccurate since World Literature is perceived from the Chinese perspective as a useful, quite often even necessary framework for comparative literature to thrive. While there are challenges in defining World Literature (as seen in the debate over Sinophone literature) what matters more is the goal or direction that *Weltliteratur* provides. Chinese scholars believe that embracing World Literature in the 21st century will help move away from Western-centric views of comparative literature, literary quality, and the imbalance of power in the global circulation of texts. The described developments of the past two to three decades reflect a desire to reshape discourse in humanities and assert own subjectivity. However, it is yet to be seen whether the Chinese school manages to push forward the literary studies outside of China.

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Transcending Civilizations: On Chinese New Literary Theory Enriching World Literature Studies

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Abstract

This article introduces three distinct theories emerging from contemporary Chinese literary circles: the search for “global elements” proposed by Chen Sihe, Cao Shunqing’s variation theory, and Wang Ning’s concept of “global poetics.” Each of these theories creatively reimagines the relationship between Chinese literature and world literature, challenging the dominant image of a literary system that has been mostly shaped by Western aesthetics and concepts. In this context, world literature is conceptualized in the article as a kind of *ideoscape*. Although each of these three contributions pursues slightly different aims, they all hold the potential to expand our understanding of the global circulation of literary ideas.

Keywords: World Literature, Chinese Literature, Chinese discourse, literary theory

Introduction

A canonical opening sentence of a scholarly article on World Literature quite often states that the topic is “on the rise,” “gathering momentum,” or “experiencing a revival.” Such formulaic affirmations underscore the extent to which the concept has consolidated its place within literary theory. Despite its apparent omnipresence in academic literary discourse, the longevity of World Literature

¹ theory is far from guaranteed. Like all theoretical paradigms, it is subject to a possible decline. Yet there is something distinctly novel about the three decades of an intensified debate on this

¹ My use of capital letters points toward a distinct theoretical object, as compared to “world literature” as a sum of literary texts. Whenever I use the latter form, I refer to the meaning noted here.

not-so-new paradigm. For the first time, paraphrasing Goethe's famous call, each *may* work to hasten the coming of the epoch of world literature theory.

Chinese scholars (along with many others) belong to what once was a silent majority that now has an unprecedented opportunity to shape the paradigm and grammar of the discipline. As Wang Ning, one of the theorists discussed in this article, notes in the context of the cultural turn in literary studies, an unprecedented opportunity to shift China's position "from a theory-consuming country to a theory-producing country" has emerged (*After Postmodernism* 84).

This article takes that theoretical ambition as its point of departure. It aims to present and analyze three distinct frameworks proposed by contemporary Chinese scholars: (1) the search for "global elements" (*shijiexing yinsu*) in Chinese literature proposed by Chen Sihe; (2) researching "literary variations" (*wenxue bianyi*) advocated by Cao Shunqing; and (3) the notion of "global poetics" (*shijie shixue*) put forward by Wang Ning. These three perspectives are presented in chronological order: Chen Sihe initiated the debate on "global elements" at the end of the previous century; Cao first elaborated on variations in 2005; and Wang Ning produced his manifesto-like proposal in 2014. The ideas only occasionally intersect. The connection among them is not established through similar methods, but rather a greater conceptual framework, and, in part, the conclusions they reach. The way these scholars discuss (mostly) Chinese literature and literary theory in relation to World Literature proves that the latter can be termed—what I propose to call—a literary discourse of positionality.

Each of these scholars produced work worthy of separate and thorough academic investigation and response. These three contributions resist total synthesis, but I believe that juxtaposing these ideas offers a complex landscape of tendencies presented by Chinese literary scholars. All three scholars have been actively shaping the Chinese literary discourse of the past three decades. Their theories analyzed here together draw a full axis of time frame orientations. Chen Sihe proposes updating the methodological tenets of the discipline to reframe literary history, Cao Shunqing offers many past examples to reconfigure our current habits of comparing literary texts and phenomena, while Wang Ning looks ahead to the future paradigm of discussions over world literatures.

Reflecting on Wang Ning's academic trajectory, Theo D'haen notes that, sometime before 2010, Wang "assumes an increasingly more self-confident Chinese stance and calls for an authentically Chinese approach in literary studies, including comparative and world literature studies" (D'haen, "Wang Ning: Sinicizing" 204). When introducing Cao's work, Douwe

Fokkema invites others to comment on it, so “the cross-cultural dialogue he [Cao Shunqing] is hoping for will materialize” (Cao, *The Variation Theory* vii). One of the aims of this article is to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the variation theory and, based on these three proposals, to reflect on what “an authentically Chinese approach in world literature studies” (D’haen, “Wang Ning” 205) might entail. This work seeks to offer insight into paradigm shifts proposed by Chinese literary theorists. A closer analysis of these conceptual frameworks follows the evolving dynamic between Chinese literature and world literature. In Liu’s terms (“How to Become” 292), this trajectory moves from “grasping” (*wo na*), through “possessing” (*wo you*), to reach the final stage of “contributing” (*wo gei*). In this article, “Chinese” is not merely a signifier of place-based practices but also a disciplinary distinction. In recent years, the scope and vibrancy of debates have resulted in separate approaches toward “Chinese literature” and “Sinophone literature.” My focus on the former reflects the theoretical orientation of Chen, Cao, and Wang, who all consider “Chinese” the key points of interest. “Sinophone” could be in fact read through the lenses of Cao Shunqing’s variations, yet this speculation is beyond the scope of this research.

Given the tendency among Chinese scholars to link the country’s global position with its potential to generate new ideas in the humanities toward the outside world, the present moment appears especially opportune. Wang Ning, along with Liu Tongyang, argues that earlier attempts to construct a “Chinese school” in the 1970s and 1980s were “premature” but that today—thanks to China’s political standing—there is no longer any reason for Chinese scholars “not to strengthen their cultural and theoretical self-confidence” (Wang and Liu 201). However, the basic premises of the Chinese school, such as the search for harmony and inclusiveness rooted in philosophical traditions, are very much echoed in these proposals, as presented in the following analyses. The contributions by Chen, Cao, and Wang all deconstruct the oppositional dichotomy between China and the West, which constituted the key “Chinese problem” of comparative literature, regardless of whether the dominant mode was “use Western to explain Chinese” (*yi Xi jie Zhong*) or “use Chinese to explain Western” (*yi Zhong jie Xi*) (Li 13). The more nuanced approach presented by the three Chinese scholars reflects a wider paradigm shift within the field, which has moved from stable and essentialist categories toward the epistemology of networks and relationships (Hao 149).

Theoretical Framework

I propose to look at World Literature as a kind of what Arjun Appadurai called *ideoscape*. Ideoscape is a type of global cultural flow, distinguished as such along with *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, and *financescapes*. While the other prefixes are rather self-explanatory, the “scapes” of *ideoscapes* constitute the theoretical foundation for analyzing the complexities and disjunctures of the global cultural economy:

These terms with the common suffix -scape also indicate that these are not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors. (Appadurai 33)

The travel of the concept of World Literature has disrupted the internal coherence once maintained by a Eurocentric master narrative. As a result, the term now resembles a set of loose, kaleidoscopic structures, within which every literary system² reconceptualizes World Literature around different keywords and ideas (Appadurai 36). Therefore, the notion of positionality must be expanded. Rather than referring solely to the researcher’s individual determinants as a form of self-praxis, I propose the term “cultural positionality” to examine how the differing approaches of these three scholars reorganize the idea of World Literature around similar “keywords and ideas” that reflect the features of China’s contemporary discourse on the topic.

I believe that Appadurai’s frameworks offer a valuable lens to investigate how multipolarity shapes ideas circulating globally. All three theories under discussion invoke terms such as “global,” “trans-civilization,” or “world,” while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of the “perspectival constructs” mentioned above—different variations of modernity that have come to life through cross-cultural translation. In such a reframing, “positionality” no longer refers to an individual stance but expresses sentiments and ideas shared among actors connected by the sense of belonging to the same culture. I opt for “cultural,” even though the project of World Literature can be seen as (cross)civilizational or political because “cultural” is wide enough to absorb these aspects and is most fitting with the notion of *ideoscapes*.

² “Literary system” as defined by Even-Zohar.

The new comparatist approach advocated by Spivak is evident in all three proposals, even though, as Chen notes, “comparative literature cannot merely be the gauge of a literary itinerary map; instead, it must involve unmeasurable factors in the field of aesthetics” (*Global Elements* 154). Regardless of how much these scholars seem dedicated to engaging with comparative literature, they all construct different modes of negotiating literary differences. These theories also differ in the extent to which they engage with “World Literature” as a disciplinary construct. Wang Ning views his global poetics as a natural outcome of the prominence of World Literature in literary discourse. Cao Shunqing, by contrast, gives relatively little attention to the term in his monograph on variation theory, even when proposing the “cross-civilizational” approach.³ Elsewhere, however, he aligns variation theory (Cao and Zhai) with David Damrosch’s concept of the “elliptical refraction” of national literatures and applies this framework to works such as Mo Yan’s fiction (Cao and Wang). Chen Sihe occupies a position between these two perspectives; for him, world literature serves as a central reference point in reinterpreting Chinese literature of the past century.

Literature Review

All three theories have attracted scholarly interest that often reaches beyond China’s academic community. Given the broad scope of ideas discussed here—namely, World Literature and poetics—this literature review focuses specifically on scholarly responses to Chen’s global elements, Cao’s variation theory, and Wang’s global poetics.

A substantial portion of academic engagement with Cao’s variation theory appears in *CLC: Comparative Literature and Culture*, an open-access journal published by Purdue University. In addition to Cao’s own contributions, relevant articles include works by Moore, Zhou, and Lu. The reception of the theory, along with its role in reinforcing Chinese discourse, is further outlined in a chapter by Wang Miaomiao. Variation has already inspired first case studies, such as Tötösy de Zepetnek’s analysis of the Hungarian author Adrienne Orosz de Csicsér, and Chen’s use of variation theory (“Variation Studies”) to examine the image of China shown in the detective novels about Judge Dee (Chen, “Variation Studies”).

³ Cao is, however, no stranger to discussing World Literature as a distinct topic, see, e.g., Cao and Zhang.

Chen Sihe's notion of "global elements" gained traction in Chinese academic circles during the first decade of the twenty-first century (Xie "On the study"), and it continues to be developed in more recent research; an example of the very recent academic discussion on the topic is the article by Zha, who considers global elements as a key element to construct "common/shared poetics" (*gongtong shixue*). As for the research written in English, Chen Sihe's take on global elements is briefly discussed by Liu Hongtao (Liu, "Chinese literature's route"). Moreover, global elements have served as a theoretical lens or a methodological tool in analyses of authors such as Mo Yan (Hua), Lu Xun (Yi), and Jia Pingwa (Liberati).

The year 2024 was marked by a symposium dedicated to Wang Ning's concept of world poetics, published as a special issue of the *Philosophy and Literature Journal*. The proposals and research findings presented there form a key part of my analysis of Wang's contribution and are cited accordingly throughout this article. It is important to note, however, that discussions on East-West comparative poetics predate Wang Ning's initial articulation of world poetics. A notable example includes the work of Zhang Longxi (*Allegoresis*, "Poetics and World Literature").

Not Only "Influenced": Chen Sihe's Global Elements as a Rewriting of Literary History

Chen Sihe's work has shaped the rethinking of modern Chinese literature. His initial aim was to revise dominant narratives surrounding the development of Chinese literature in the twentieth century, yet the theoretical premise of "global elements" remains highly relevant today. Chen observes that "in modern society, ... with highly developed technology and extremely frequent information exchange, it seems impossible to verify cultural influences through conventional textual research" (*Global Elements* 12). While this rationale initially served to reinterpret the literature of the May Fourth Movement, today, it appears even more compelling, as both technological and informational factors have expanded in scale and intensity. In this context, the search for "global elements" in literature feels self-evident.

The external influences in Chen's terms are multidimensional and extend far beyond the literary system. The influenced culture adds another layer to the "choir of globalization" (Cao, "The Discourse"). Chen neither denies the existence of literary influence nor seeks to root out the traces of Western literatures on Chinese literature. Rather, his concept of "global elements" emphasizes the synchronicity (a notion discussed later) of diverse literary phenomena. This

hypothesis replaces influences, often embedded with hierarchical inequalities as “the primary context,” with a model based on global elements of equal status (Chen, *Global Elements* 157).

This serves as a starting point for deconstructing the view that the “impact-response” dynamic forms the foundation of Chinese literature’s developmental trajectory. Chen, with a notable frankness, acknowledges the *gravitas* of this endeavor. From a Western perspective, moving away from standardized literary history might appear “conventional” or even unremarkable. However, this stands in stark contrast with “the often tumultuous and stormy reaction” that such proposals elicit in China (in Y. Zhang, *A Companion* 466-67). The very process of writing literary history—even the most recent one—may both construct and obstruct “the existence of multiple possibilities of modernity” (Chen, *Global Elements* 190). The simplified narrative being challenged is the notion that “Chinese modern and contemporary literature developed under the influence of foreign literature” (*Global Elements* 150). The reinvention of the field of Chinese modern literature is at heart of Chen’s academic work; in 1988, he, along with Wang Xiaoming, initiated a discussion on national canon in hope for less-politically charged reading of some of the country’s modern classics (Y. Wang 28).

Chen offers a historically grounded and pragmatic explanation for the persistence of this perspective. Like many other achievements in the humanities, comparative literature arrived relatively late in China, due in part to a phenomenon that Chen describes as “asynchronicity” (the term explained further below). Once the intense phase of “catching up” began in the 1980s, the French School of “impact study” exerted the greatest influence, shaping how Sino-foreign literary relations were subsequently discussed. As a result, these relationships have largely been framed through an empirical approach focused on tracing textual imprints of foreign influence. Such an approach has come to dominate broader conceptualizations of China’s literary interactions with the world. Chen proposes a holistic view of China’s modern (pre-1949) and contemporary (post-1949) literature, centered on rejecting the conventional division between these two periods—a distinction he considers artificial within the context of Chinese literary history.⁴ This holistic approach also challenges the tendency to label Chinese literature with tags referring to collectively remembered historical events: May Fourth Literature, *scar literature*, post-Maoist literature, etc. (Braester 437).

⁴ Cao Shunqing had already proposed merging these two periods into one (“modern and contemporary Chinese literature”/*Zhongguo xiandangdai wenxue*) in 1987. In a chapter from 2016, Cao Shunqing claims that the category “twentieth-century Chinese literature” has become a new norm in periodization in the field.

Within this framework, Chen identifies the ongoing tension between synchronicity and asynchronicity (*Global Elements* 29). Although Chen's discussion focuses on Chinese literature, the terminology he introduces demonstrates relevance for analyzing other local literatures, particularly those historically considered to be outside of "centers" constructed by Western tradition. Synchronicity, in contrast to power-based models of literary influence from center to periphery (such as those given by e.g., Moretti), denotes a tendency toward coordination and harmony that facilitates intercultural literary communication. Asynchronicity, on the other hand, represents what is local, specific, and resistant to unification. These factors extend beyond strictly literary concerns and may include, for example, "domestic political and economic forces" (11). Continuity of China's cultural practices is a kind of asynchronicity that is quite often ignored due to the conventional portrayal of the May Fourth Movement as a rapid overthrow of tradition. This, actually, is a very old argument, presented by Průšek, who pointed out the premodern lyricism of Chinese literature as an important source of Chinese writers' subjectivity (Y. Wang 29).

As "foreign influences are completely integrated into a country's everyday cultural life ... their channels may simply be unrecognizable" (*Global Elements* 140). The recognition of this dualistic tension represents an attempt to reframe China's relationship with the outside world in the twentieth century, which carries some resemblance to the long-standing debates surrounding *Zhong ti Xi yong* (Western learning for substance, Chinese learning for function), which were revitalized in the 1980s by Li Zehou (see, e.g., Pohl; Machajek and Świątczak-Borowy).

Chen frequently refers to binary frameworks, such as pre-1949/post-1949, tradition-modernity, and World-China, only to demonstrate that they are insufficient for explaining literary developments. As he argues, "a more complex model of 'world' literature is being constructed by the literature of China and of other countries on an equal status" (*Global Elements* 152). It is precisely here that the broader applicability of Chen's ideas starts to transcend the Chinese context. "Global" in these new terms changes its keywords from "quality," "size," and "scope," to "method," "approach," or "mindset." According to Chen, diverse cultural patterns coexist within the "global village" on an equal footing. This contrasts sharply with the earlier mainstream view, which imagined non-Western literary productions as crops that grow out of "seeds of Western literature. (ibid.)"

As mentioned previously, more conventional framing implies a teleological model of development toward modernity that would ultimately be fulfilled by adopting Western

paradigms. A similar logic underpins the model known as *zouxiang shijie*, “moving toward the world.” This phrase, coined in the 1980s, is still commonly used in literary debates. The phrase seems to capture the lingering sense that Chinese literature remains peripheral or unintegrated with world literature. Chen thus redirects attention from *influences on Chinese literature* to the *global characteristics of influences*, treating Chinese literature as only (despite its tremendous volume) one illustrative case among many.

An example of textual analysis that employs the framework of “global elements” to reinterpret Chinese literary work is Chen’s essay on avant-gardist characteristics of the May Fourth New Literary Movement, particularly as embodied in its most prominent figure, Lu Xun. The movement’s rejection of traditional culture, Chen argues, bears affinities with the iconoclastic impulses of Italian and Russian futurists of the same period (*Global Elements* 180). Although the avant-gardist characterization of Chinese literature from this era is not common in the discourse, Chen contends that affirming such a reading offers a broader understanding of “the entire literary environment at the time” (162). He further notes that the avant-gardist gesture involves an attack on “the distribution apparatus on which the work of art depends, and the [contemporary] status of art” (175). The May Fourth New Literature Movement, though internally diverse and far from unanimity, can nonetheless be seen as targeting both these structures.

As for Lu Xun’s writing, instead of the conventional focus on his familiarity with Gogol and Nietzsche, Chen asks whether the stance adopted by Lu Xun and other writers of the time reflects “similar conclusions without direct impact when facing the same kind of phenomena under similar circumstances” (362). His aim is not to dispute the widely accepted view of, for example, Nietzsche’s influence on Lu Xun’s work. Rather, he emphasizes that empirical research alone cannot accurately determine the depth or complexity of such influences with precision (144). Lu Xun’s “man-eating imagery,” as portrayed in *A Madman’s Diary* and serving as a literary symbol of the time, questions the ethical compass of not just Chinese society, which follows the avant-gardist impulse to dissect humanitarian premises in societies in general. Despite the markedly different social conditions that those lived through avant-gardists in Germany, Italy, or Russia, the “fighting voice” and the “rebellious factor” may point to a similar consciousness of artists, or, drawing from Chen’s work, a common global element of cultural development.

Drawing on comparative literature studies, Chen offers an expanded understanding of “influence” as a force that governs the structural levels of literary production, one that shifts

toward a situational understanding of literary modernity. This distancing away from a strictly empirical model of “borrowings” reconfigures the map of world literature into a “global village” *ideoscape*, where ideas fluctuate, shaped by local asynchronicities. In this framework, “influence” accommodates convergence without direct contact. The notion of global elements highlights shared modern conditions marked by fragmentation and cultural rupture—features that were not unique to any specific area in the twentieth century.

Chen Sihe’s exploration of Chinese literary historiography exemplifies a nuanced approach to the evolving nature of modern Chinese literature. By highlighting the dynamic interplay between literature and sociopolitical transformation, Chen positions Chinese literary traditions within broader historical and ideological currents. Within this framework, global elements are not merely a useful interpretative tool but also “the most conspicuous distinction between Chinese literature of the twentieth century and classical literature” (163). Chen’s theoretical model is simultaneously grounded in China’s national identity and attuned to global literary trends. Looking ahead, the most promising future direction for global elements is to use its productive lens as a theoretical tool to analyze literary works beyond the Sinosphere.

Varying on Every Level: Cao Shunqing’s Idea to Push Comparative Literature Forward

Cao Shunqing’s theoretical point of departure is the notion of non-translatability at both textual and cultural levels, let alone at the level of cross-civilizational exchange. He elaborates on this idea by drawing on Western theory, such as Foucault’s discussion of the “collection of discourse” (*The Variation Theory* 116), and ancient Chinese literature, referencing an episode from *Yanzi*, summed up with a phrase *nan ju bei zhi* (an orange tastes different when planted on opposite banks of a river). Cultural heterogeneity, in Cao’s view, is negotiated through a range of translation and adaptation strategies, with the differences that emerge in the process conceptualized as *variations* (*bianyi*). These variations are the heart of Cao’s theory. As Wang observes in his review of Cao’s work (“Variation Theory and Comparative Literature”), while the method of “variation studies” had been employed earlier by Xie Tianzhen, a Chinese scholar specializing in translation studies, it is Cao who formulates a comprehensive theoretical framework for the concept.

Cao distinguishes three primary levels of variations: linguistic (in cross-language context), cultural (in cross-cultural context), and civilizational (in cross-civilization context). In addition to these, he also emphasizes variation within literary text and the process of literary domestic

appropriation, which may be situated between or across the former three categories. As the level shifts, variation can refer to different aspects of cross-cultural transfer: misreading of other cultures, mistranslations, “creative treasons,”⁵ representations of the Other within local contexts, or gatekeeping mechanisms exercised by the receiving culture (Cao, *The Variation Theory* 56-57). Cao’s engagement with Escarpit’s terminology (see footnote 5) may hint at his methodological rooting in sociology of literature, a subdiscipline interested mostly in social conditions of production of literature; this certainly is a common feature with Chen Sihe’s approach. Cao explicitly admits that “Literary Variation is everywhere” (56-57). In fact, variation is not confined to literature alone. The same dynamics apply to literary theory: When Western theoretical frameworks are used to interpret literary phenomena in China, the original theory becomes a form of influence. This trajectory can be extended even further, as Cao demonstrated through additional examples in his discussion of cross-civilization variations.⁶

The potential omnipresence of variation raises questions not only about the phenomenon itself but also about the very object of comparative literature, which, as Saussy notes, is often a conundrum in its own right. Comparative literature has already been seen as vulnerable to absorption into the broader domain of all-encompassing cultural studies, and the deconstructionist impulse to apply variation to every aspect of literary culture risks diluting the discipline’s distinctiveness. However, Cao offers a rigorous, feasible, and systematic approach for addressing multiplicity. Each component of this theoretical apparatus is clearly defined and articulated in his work. While his monograph does not elaborate on some of the influences from ancient Chinese philosophy, these foundations are acknowledged in his other scholarly writings. This philosophical grounding enables Cao’s vision to extend well beyond comparative literature. The conceptual roots of variations can be traced back to the foundational texts of Chinese thought, such as *The Book of Changes (Yijing)*, *Tao Te Ching (Dao De Jing)*, and *Zhuangzi*. These underpinnings have already been noted by Cao Shunqing. The opening line of *Tao Te Ching*, “The name that can be named is not the eternal name” (*Ming ke ming fei chang ming*),

⁵ The term was introduced by a French literary sociologist, Robert Escarpit, and, according to him, constitutes the key feature of translated literature. “The primary feature of the creative treason of literary translation lies not only in ‘transformation,’ but fundamentally in taking the text into an environment which is beyond the author’s expectation, and consequently changing the form given originally by the author,” he maintains (*The Variation Theory* 109). Cao quite often employs the notion in his analysis, and he is not the only one to do so—creative treason as a conceptual tool has received a notable appreciation from Chinese scholars, see, e.g., X. Liu; Lan; Xie “‘Creative Treason’ in Translation.”

⁶ Cao Shunqing has even co-authored papers on “general variation theory” as a generalized perspective for science (Cao et al). The possible explanation for such a scope will be provided in further parts of this article.

allegedly “established the embryo of Chinese literature regulation” (Cao, “The Discourse” 32). The shifting relationship between word, image, and meaning lies at the core of what Cao terms the “regulation of Chinese literature” (“The Discourse” 32).

The assumed decades-long neglect of cultural and civilizational heterogeneity led Cao to claim a new school of comparative literature. While the idea is not entirely unprecedented,⁷ Cao is unquestionably among the most prominent scholars to champion the “Chinese School of comparative literature” (*Zhongguo bijiao wenxue xuepai*).⁸ At one point, he characterized this school as marking a “third stage of comparative literature” (Cao, “The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature”). These stages are cascading and parallel, since the next stage does not immediately exclude the previous approaches. Instead, they form what Cao terms a “rippling structure” (Cao, “The Construction”), where newer approaches expand upon rather than replace earlier ones. This debt to earlier traditions is evident, for instance, in Cao’s continued use of thematology and imagology, which is a contribution made by the French school.

This progression positions the Chinese school alongside the French school, which emphasized influence studies, and its successor, the American school, which turned toward the analogy study.⁹ The Chinese school, by contrast, seeks to bridge the comparative gap across different civilizations. In a sense, Cao—arguably the most notable representative of the school—adopts a deconstructionist orientation (Cao, *The Variation Theory* xxv) through dissecting the networks that transfer literary texts across space and time. For Cao, heterogeneity is not merely a given but a principle to be actively foregrounded. In this view, traditional comparative models tend either to erase difference or to reduce comparison to the search for sameness and equivalence.

The ultimate aim of variation theory is to construct a “harmonious world without uniformity” (Cao, *The Variation Theory* xxi), and in this context, Cao acknowledges that cultural differences and heterogeneity can also be a breeding ground for conflict. Samuel Huntington’s theory of the “clash of civilizations” serves as a relevant backdrop,¹⁰ and Cao explicitly observes in one

⁷ For an overview, see Lin and Huang.

⁸ Not a key point to this analysis, yet possibly interesting to some: At the turn of centuries, the school was called in Chinese debates a “Sichuan school” due to its local affiliation; see Li and Yuan.

⁹ Even though Cao dedicates some parts of his work to German school and comparative literature in Russia and Italy, he only distinguishes two grand traditions. In 1998, Zhang called Cao’s characterization of the three schools “reductionist and schematic” (L. Zhang, “Engaging” 4), but he referred to Cao’s earliest propositions.

¹⁰ A few years later, Cao took a much more critical stance toward Huntington’s theory; see Cao and Liu.

of his works that “Chinese comparative literature is based in the context of cultural conflicts between China and the West” (Cao and Wang, “The False Prediction” 23). Yet this conflict is not merely reduced to cultural antagonism. Rather, Cao’s project transcends literary dimensions into the realms of epistemology and ethics, aiming to reclaim non-Western knowledge genealogies and to lay the groundwork for a “pluralism based on equality-oriented dialogue” (*The Variation Theory* 78). At another point, Cao asserts that conflict has the potential to “activate the internal elements in both sides of the conflicting culture, and to stimulate them on certain conditions” (“The Construction” 46).

There is a “pragmatic mindset” underlying Cao’s theoretical pursuit. Cao Shunqing was the first to introduce *aphasia*¹¹ (*shiyuzheng*) into Chinese scholarly debates and discourse. First proposed in 1995,¹² the term forms the foundational premise for Cao’s work, referring to the inability to produce a theory that adequately reflects China’s cultural subjectivity. In a 2017 article, Cao offered a blunt formulation of this diagnosis: “China has no theory” (Cao and Gao). This inability is attributed to China’s being positioned at the receiving end of the global circulation of ideas in the humanities. A similar sentiment, perhaps in even stronger terms, is expressed by Wang Yinchuan (“Modern Characteristics” 20): “for some scholars, modern Chinese literary theory is only a lopsided result of Westernization movements in China during the past one hundred years. It is therefore totally lacking any specific and independent modern characteristics.”

Historically, this estrangement of theory from practice was not only due to the adoption of Western paradigms. As Zhang Jiang notes, Soviet literary theory came to dominate Chinese criticism in the 1950s, without deeper reflection on its relevance to China’s specific cultural and historical conditions. This observation is not meant merely to distribute the responsibility across different geopolitical influences. Rather, it underscores a long-standing issue: “the construction of contemporary Chinese literary theory has never resolved the problem of its relationship with literary practice” (J. Zhang, “Identification of Issues” 29). The implications of this diagnosis are far-reaching. The discourse surrounding *aphasia* has involved topics such as Westernization, foreignization of literary theory, misreading Western literary theory, and so on. The concept prompts debates on contradictory tendencies, such as nativism versus Westernization or tradition versus modernization (Cao and Gao). While the persistence of the

¹¹ Wang Miaomiao, who wrote a chapter on variation theory’s reception, refers to it in a similar term: *alogia*.

¹² See also Cao, “Chinese School of Comparative Literature.”

term in Chinese discourse for the past three decades may suggest that the crisis has receded into the past (Cao and Gao). Cao revisits the topic very recently, this time focusing on rewriting the history of civilizations (“Rewriting the History”). Within literary theory, Cao’s variation theory represents a proposed response to this state of discursive weakness.

Cao’s meticulous framework, encompassing linguistic, cultural, and civilizational levels, offers a systematic approach to navigating the complexities of cross-cultural transfer. His vision of a “harmonious world without uniformity” resonates beyond the literary domain, providing valuable insights into the ethical and epistemological dimensions of cultural exchange and the way we compare literature and other cultural texts.

World Poetics: The Imperative and Inevitability of World Literature

Wang Ning is arguably one of the most internationally recognized Chinese literary scholars, due, in part, to his experience of working in Western academia and, more significantly, to his early engagement with English-language scholarship. The outstanding breadth of his interests and contributions is outlined by Shang, Sheng, and D’haen, while the more critical assessment of Wang’s work is offered by Estok; therefore, I refer to Wang’s other academic work only when directly relevant.

In 2015, Wang published an article “On the Construction of World Poetics,” which appeared simultaneously in Chinese and English. Despite its theoretical rigor, the piece reads in many ways like a manifesto, which some even describe as nearly “extremal” in some dimensions (Sheng). Wang’s work builds on Earl Miner’s concept of “generative poetics,” which he regards as preliminary and seeks to develop further. Wang first introduced the notion of world poetics (*shijie shixue*) in an earlier article dedicated to Miner’s comparative poetics (N. Wang, “Earl Miner”). As Tihanov notes, Wang does not clearly differentiate between “theory” and “poetics.” While Tihanov calls for a clearer conceptual separation, I follow Wang’s more fluid use of the terms, treating them interchangeably. This approach is further supported by Ming Dong Gu, who argues that “poetics is no longer restricted to poetic theories but signifies a general term for *theory*” (“World Poetics” 69).

As Sheng observes, Wang’s development of world poetics is deeply rooted in his engagement with the dynamics of cosmopolitanism and globalization. In 2024, even though we are

witnessing the discussions on deglobalization,¹³ Wang reaffirms his commitment to world poetics (“From Comparative Poetics”). This ongoing dedication highlights the continuing relevance of his project, both within World Literature Studies and for Chinese scholars “trying to construct their own theoretical discourse” (“From Comparative Poetics” 1).

World poetics, as Wang conceives it, emerges from the practice of world literature, which he regards as having already become an “aesthetic reality” (N. Wang, “Weltliteratur”). World Literature has established itself as the dominant paradigm for literary discourse in the contemporary era, and this dispersed set of practices requires a “theoretical sublimation” (N. Wang, “From Comparative Poetics” 10). His approach is partly reactive, responding to the epistemic “demand” of the current “epoch of world literature,” where world poetics remains in a formative stage, a by-product of globalized literary practices. Wang’s use of the term “sublimation,” borrowed from the hard sciences, echoes David Damrosch’s metaphor of “refractions of national literatures.” Though loosely aligned, both may point to the need for a kind of scientific protocol that prevents the radically open system of world poetics from devolving into conceptual vagueness.

Wang’s latest continuation of constructing world poetics again operates on a very general level. Compared to the first attempt from 2015, Wang narrowed down the number of principles from nine to five. The comparison is presented below:

“On the Construction of World Poetics”:

1. World poetics must break through the limitations of West-centrism.
2. World poetics should transcend the barriers of language and culture.
3. It [world poetics] should be used to explain all phenomena concerning world literature.
4. World poetics should be a combination of universalism and relativism.
5. In using world poetics as a theoretical model in literary interpretation, we must by no means resort to the “forced interpretation” of literary texts or phenomena at the expense of concrete analysis.

¹³ For a brief discussion focused on literature, see Loy and Müller.

6. World poetics should be an open system that can conduct a dialogue with other branches of the humanities.
7. World poetics should be translatable, to help the effective interpretation of literary works and literary texts other than those from the Western world.
8. As long as a theory can be used to interpret or critique works of world literature, it can be regarded as belonging to world poetics.
9. Given that we can construct a world poetics, the literary theorists of each age can question, modify or even restructure it.

“From Comparative Poetics to World Poetics: A Proposed Theoretical Construction”:

1. World poetics is the theoretical sublimation of world literature.
2. World poetics is the canon selected from literary theories produced in all countries in the world.
3. The theoretical categories and concepts of world poetics could be used to interpret all the phenomena and problems in literary theory studies and literary critical practice worldwide.
4. World poetics should take into account the combination of universality and relativity.
5. World poetics is not a closed concept but rather an open theoretical body that gains in translation and cross-cultural interpretation and can be constantly reconstructed.

Recent commentators on the latest iteration of world poetics, such as Beebee and Ming Dong Gu, have focused on Wang’s updated five principles. As shown in the preceding comparison, Wang’s current articulation appears less preoccupied with directly challenging Western theoretical dominance. Whereas in 2015 he called for “break through the limitations of West-centrism” (N. Wang, “On the construction” 190), such a stance may now seem less urgent in light of a broader acceptance of diverse perspectives within World Literature debates. The revised model also places less emphasis on ideological underpinnings or the role of nonliterary forces that would warp world poetics—tendencies Wang previously described as “forced interpretation” (“On the construction” 191). Wang belongs to a group of more pragmatic scholars, who accept (perhaps only for the time being) English as *lingua franca* (“On World Literatures”) and therefore wish to uphold translation as the key mode of world literature. In a

similar vein, Zhang Longxi (“Chinese Literature,” 31) questions critiques of translating into English, since they happen to be expressed exactly when world literature today “opens up opportunities to introduce non-Western literary works to a global readership.” Wang, however, in his formulation of world poetics is not so direct about the function of any specific language. Translation, after all, is “reciprocal” (Y. Zhang, “Locations” 54)—something that is often overlooked by Western scholars. Circulation of literature and theory in non-Western languages could provide a “missing link in world literature debates” (Y. Zhang, “Locations,” 54).

Much like World Literature, world poetics takes shape through the very process of being debated and theorized. In this context, both Cao Shunqing and Wang Ning advocate for incorporating *Wenxin diaolong* (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons) into the scope of contemporary literary studies. Written by Liu Xie in the early sixth century, the text is recognized as the first comprehensive Chinese treatise on literature. *Wenxin diaolong* remains completely unknown outside Sinological circles, which Cao and Wang view as a significant oversight, given its potential relevance for “the study and interpretive practice of world literature and critical phenomena” (N. Wang, “From Comparative Poetics” 11). Their efforts highlight a relatively unexplored avenue of cross-cultural interpretation by drawing upon non-Western theories, such as the critical apparatus embedded in *Wenxin diaolong*. This commitment to the age-old treatise draws attention to a very vast field of premodern writing from China with a potential of becoming a part of investigations into Chinese literature as world literature.

By refining his framework over time, from the broader set of principles introduced in 2015 to the more focused formulation in 2024, Wang demonstrates a commitment to shaping a robust and adaptable theoretical model. In 1985, Zeng Xiaoyi outlined the totality of the historical development of world literature. Wang’s proposals represent the more advanced stage of “the continuing exchange and convergence” that aims to move toward “humanity’s future epoch of a united world literature” (H. Liu 289). His insistence on bridging Chinese and Western literary traditions, as seen in his engagement with texts like *Wenxin diaolong*, underscores the significance of incorporating historically overlooked contributions into global literary discourse. Wang’s work thus serves not only as a theoretical response to the emergence of World Literature as a dominant paradigm but also as a call to rethink the notion of universality in twenty-first-century literary studies. A question that invites further inquiry is how Wang’s principle might continue to evolve and adapt to the shifting dynamics of (de)globalization and the rapidly transforming literary landscape.

Conclusion

These proposals form the outlines of a new Chinese literary paradigm at a time when the very notion of theory as a discourse is being contested. While Wang Ning's world poetics can be read as an invitation to build a new corpus of contributions, Chen Sihe and Cao Shunqing are already what Gu Ming Dong called a "head-on-bottom models": "a solid scholarship guided by a tentative, self-adjusting fore-conceptions and speculations" ("Problems with Paradigms").

As global literary studies continue to grapple with questions of hierarchy, influence, and representation, these perspectives from Chinese scholarship present the potential for a more inclusive and dialogic future. By reframing the narratives of modernity, influence, and globalization, they pave the way for literary studies that embrace multiplicity not as a complication, but as a foundational paradigm for understanding and describing the *ideoscape* of World Literature. Their differences do not undermine a shared direction of the Chinese humanities to become more visible in international spheres; rather, they mark the contours of literary theory being in constant motion, one where comparison (still!) and difference are axiomatic for the new paradigms. Also, each of these scholars, in their own way, seeks to (re)claim the agency of Chinese literary theory. To paraphrase D'haen, on a par with China's geopolitical rise, they are increasingly inclined to play the "Chinese origin card." Despite varying objectives, Chen Sihe, Cao Shunqing, and Wang Ning share a commitment to examining the totality of literary practice and critique without imposing any claims about the universality of any single cultural center. This emerging body of Chinese literary theory insists that while World Literature is one, the discursive positionality of those who shape it must remain open to a plurality of perspectives.

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Li Zehou's Ideas on Chinese Modernity Revisited: Possible Applications of *Xi ti Zhong yong*

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Abstract

We propose Li Zehou's idea of "Western Learning for Substance, Chinese Learning for Function" (*Xi ti Zhong yong* 西體中用) as an interpretative framework for two distinct theories: Sungmoon Kim's political theory of public reason Confucianism and Yan Lianke's literary theory of mythorealism. This paper aims to show that *Xi ti Zhong yong* can provide a unified explanatory framework for these two apparently distinct theories. Second, we show that *Xi ti Zhong yong* can be applied even more broadly to other phenomena occurring in contemporary discourses on China. In particular, we show that it provides new interpretative perspectives in political philosophy and literary theory.

Keywords: Li Zehou, history of ideas, Chinese philosophy, Yan Lianke, mythorealism, Sungmoon Kim, Public Reason Confucianism

Ponovni pregled Li Zehouovih idej o kitajski modernosti: možne aplikacije *Xi ti Zhong yong*

Izvleček

Avtorja članka predlagata Li Zehouovo idejo o »zahodnem učenju kot substanci in kitajskem učenju kot funkciji« (*Xi ti Zhong yong* 西體中用) kot interpretativni okvir za dve različni teoriji: Sungmoon Kimovo politično teorijo konfucijanskega javnega razuma in Yan Liankejevo literarno teorijo mitorealizma. Namen članka je pokazati, da lahko *Xi ti Zhong yong* ponudi enoten razlagalni okvir za ti dve na videz različni teoriji. Avtor in avtorica pokažeta, da je *Xi ti Zhong yong* mogoče uporabiti v širšem smislu za druge pojave, ki se pojavljajo v sodobnih diskurzih o Kitajski. Predvsem pa izpostavljata, da ta ponuja nove perspektive za interpretacije politične filozofije ter literarne teorije.

Ključne besede: Li Zehou, zgodovina idej, kitajska filozofija, Yan Lianke, mitorealizem, Sungmoon Kim, konfucijanstvo javnega razuma

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Introduction

This article aims to revisit Li Zehou's idea of "Western Learning for Substance, Chinese Learning for Application" (*Xi ti Zhong yong* 西體中用), further referred to as *Xi ti Zhong yong*. Our research is an attempt to operationalize it in the areas of political philosophy and literary studies. In particular, we draw on Li's idea to provide a new interpretative framework for Sungmoon Kim's public reason Confucianism and Yan Lianke's mythorealism (*shenshizhuyi* 神實主義). We believe that some crucial features of this framework are indicative of its explanatory force not only for the two presented theories, but also for a more comprehensive array of theories that explore modern Chinese phenomena. Such features include the search for continuity as well as the evolutionary (rather than revolutionary) character of how modernization pathways for China have been shaped.

This article has the following structure: first, we briefly present the historical context of Li Zehou's idea and his approach to the interplay between the two well-established concepts of "substance" (*ti* 體) and "application/function" (*yong* 用). In particular, we outline the significance and implications of *Xi ti Zhong yong*. In the main part, we first present Sungmoon Kim's political theory of public reason Confucianism and then Yan Lianke's literary theory of mythorealism through the interpretative lens of *Xi ti Zhong yong*. Finally, we conclude with final remarks and provide a perspective for further research on *Xi ti Zhong yong*.

Li Zehou was an active thinker from the 1950s until his death in 2021, and well-read in both Eastern and Western traditions. He created some of his most insightful works in the 1970s and 80s, including a panoramic overview of the history of Chinese thought, a critical examination of Kant's philosophy, and a re-evaluation of Confucius' heritage (Lambert 2021). Li solidified his academic standing with the publication of *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics* in 1981. Although his work on Chinese aesthetics earned him the status of an academic celebrity, he decided to venture into a new philosophical area after adopting a stance critical of the government's response to the Tiananmen Protests in 1989, and after three years of house arrest he moved to the US in 1992. Li proposed some distinctive ethical theories, such as the theory of sedimentation and "emotion as substance". The last few years have brought a renewed interest in Li Zehou's thought; among them, a book edited by Ames and Jia (2018) and the special issue of *Asian Studies* dedicated to his work (2020). In the former, Karl-Heinz Pohl presented probably the most recent and most explanatory take on the idea of *Xi ti Zhong yong*.

The reception of an essay published in 1987, "Random Thoughts on 'Western Learning as Substance, Chinese Learning as Application'" (*Man shuo Xi ti Zhong*

yong 漫說西體中用), was indicative of Li's future. Published at the height of his popularity in the People's Republic of China, "Random Thoughts" was fiercely criticized both by radical liberals for an overly conservative approach and by orthodox Marxists for inviting total Westernization (*quanpan xihua* 全盘西化) (Liu 1994; Pohl 2018). Whether or not his critics were right, such divergent receptions of Li's proposal indicate its interpretative potency and richness.

However, its immediate reception in the late 1980s is not what matters most today for developing the ideas shared in Li's essay from 1987. His proposal of *Xi ti Zhong yong* is a subversive voice in a much longer debate. China's position towards the West has been a leitmotif of Chinese intellectual life and social debates since the Opium Wars. This historical frame needs to be accounted for in discussions of Li's views on Chinese modernity.

Moreover, the distinct starting points of Li Zehou's conception present it as particularly well-suited for engaging in a meaningful dialogue with a diverse array of contemporary voices. His ideas, rooted in a deep understanding of Chinese intellectual traditions while simultaneously engaging with Western philosophies, create a fertile ground for dialogue with thinkers such as Sungmoon Kim, whose works delve into East Asian political philosophy, or literary figures like Yan Lianke, who is keenly interested in the pace and influence of modernization in China and its toll on society.

Sungmoon Kim's reflections are inspired by the actual social existence of people in East Asia. According to Kim, the enduring East-Asian social conditions are irrevocably marked by value pluralism and structured by political institutions originating from external traditions. Nonetheless, the lives of East Asians are deeply permeated by Confucian mores and habits. The question then is how one can accommodate the fact that Confucianism greatly influences East Asians even if they identify themselves as followers of other doctrines in their public and private lives.

Likewise, there are noticeable similarities between Li Zehou and Yan Lianke. In both cases their theoretical work stems from genuine concern for society, and both Li and Yan take an interest in China's development and path toward modernity, even though they use different tools in approaching these topics. Even though it is not crucial to this analysis, it is worth mentioning that Yan, just like Li, examines the relationship between humans and productive forces. He does so by presenting in his fiction recurring motifs to comment on painful societal matters such as the exploitation of the human body (*Hard Like Water* (2021), *Lenin's Kisses* (2012), and *Dream of Ding Village* (2009)), absurdities resulting from hyper-fast development (*The Explosion Chronicles* (2018b)), or engagement in utopias (*The Four Books* (2016) and *The Day the Sun Died* (2018a)).

Both theories presented in the article are holistic. They both reassess the role of Chinese tradition, grapple with the question of Western influences in contemporary China, and reach similar conclusions.

In the article, we will first shed new light on Sungmoon Kim's attempt to establish congruence between democratic liberal institutions and Confucian self-identification. We will then reinterpret Yan Lianke's mythorealism by arguing that it is conceptually close to *Xi ti Zhong yong*.

Xi ti Zhong yong was not proposed to establish a framework for any particular area of study. It was Li's system of philosophical aesthetics and his concepts of the "humanization of nature" (*zirande renhua* 自然的人化), the "naturalization of humans" (*rende ziranhua* 人的自然化), "subjectality" (*zhutixing* 主體性) and "sedimentation" (*jidian* 積澱) that were previously applied in literary studies. In particular, his idea of human subjectality directly influenced the theory of literary subjectivity put forward by Liu Zaifu (Lin 1992). Similarly, it was Li's simultaneous apprehension of Kant's aesthetics and Marx's politics that invited reflections on concepts such as political freedom (Bruya 2003).

Why then, do we intend to argue that *Xi ti Zhong yong* is applicable to the fields of literary study and political philosophy? First, Li's formulation stems from his awareness that Western influences on Chinese reality cannot be ignored. This awareness is a substantial background behind Chinese intellectual debates. Second, we believe that the two theories share a common ground with Li's idea and can be thought of as concrete instances of *Xi ti Zhong yong*. Finally, exploring links between *Xi ti Zhong yong* and its potential practical applications provides an opportunity to reinterpret the latter. We are not looking for the direct conceptual genealogy linking *Xi ti Zhong yong* with the ideas analysed here. Instead, we aim to show that Li's proposal serves as a useful interpretative framework for different research areas.

Xi ti Zhong yong: The Context and the Contents

The Chinese intellectual landscape in the 19th and 20th centuries went through waves of change and deconstruction. Contact with the West, although initially conducted on Chinese terms, deteriorated into "the century of humiliation". The disintegration of the idea that Chinese culture offers sufficient resources to respond to any challenge forced Chinese intellectuals to actively seek ways of addressing the pressures of modernization. This impulse for modernization had a very particular face—one of deeply Western provenance. The inrush of "Western

learning” propelled by the use of military power was not yet another ideological novelty to be absorbed and Sinicized by the capacious means of Chinese culture. Instead, it created a vital challenge to the very paradigm of the Chinese political model. As a result, Chinese thinkers were determined to reexamine their traditions and come up with ingenious ways of confronting this challenge. The spectre of “Western learning” became a presence—to some menacing, to others providential—that was ubiquitous and unavoidable. The responses took multifarious shapes, spanning between two organizing principles of “Westernization” (*xibua* 西化) and “Sinicization” (*zhonghua* 中化) (Yu 2010, 153). The former is probably best represented by Hu Shi’s appeals for “total Westernization”, whereas the latter took the most prevalent form in Zhang Zhidong’s formulation of “Chinese learning as substance, Western learning as application” (*Zhongxue wei ti Xixue wei yong* 中學為體西學為用) put forward in “Exhortation to Study” (*Quanxue Pian* 勸學篇) in 1898.

A binary notion of substance and function has been present in Chinese tradition from the times of neo-Confucianism. Thus, the idea of “Chinese learning as substance, Western learning for application” had already taken deep roots in the Chinese intellectual landscape when Li Zehou conducted his “ingenious turnaround” (Pohl 2018, 64). At the end of the 19th century, Zhang Zhidong repurposed the neo-Confucian notions of *ti* and *yong* to present his vision of incorporating Western ideas and changing the country. In Zhang’s understanding, *Zhong ti* represented the orthodox basis of society (ibid., 63). In his influential work, Zhang voiced the belief of his time that Western learning could be limited to scientific, technological, and economic know-how, effectively serving what the Chinese could call “worldly affairs” (*shishi* 世事).

Zhang’s use of *ti-yong* was “by no means orthodox in a Confucian philosophical way but [...] rather creatively clever” (Pohl 2018). Li Zehou, on the other hand, despite returning to the traditional view of *ti-yong* as inseparable (*tiyong bu er* 體用不二), proposed a treatment of the formula that was far from conventional. First, Li adapted this idea by reversing it. Second, he proposed a different understanding of *ti*:

I repeatedly emphasize that social existence is the substance of society [*benti* 本体]. Turning ‘*ti*’ into social existence does not involve only the ideological state, and it is not just ‘science’. Social existence is a mode of production and ways of everyday life. This is social existence in itself from the materialistic viewpoint and the root of human existence. Modernization primarily means changing this ‘*ti*’. (Li 1987; authors’ own translation)

Here Li believes *ti* and *yong* to be two sides of the same coin. The “function” (*yong*) is an “upgrade” and “variation” of the Chinese tradition and the starting point to realize the Western *ti*.

This ‘Chinese function’ involves ‘Western substance’ applied in China and includes Chinese traditional culture and ‘Chinese learning’ since those should serve as the way and method to achieve ‘*Xi ti*’ (modernization). In this sense of ‘*yong*’, what used to be the original ‘Chinese learning’ is upgraded, altered, and varied. Only with this kind of ‘*Zhong yong*’ ‘Western substance’ can be genuinely and adequately Sinicized, instead of—yet again—turning it under the banner of Sinicization into ‘adopting Western knowledge for its practical while keeping Chinese values as the core’. (Li 1987; authors' own translation)

In a comprehensive and highly elucidative chapter, Karl-Heinz Pohl describes “Western learning as substance” as a modernized social existence that not only comprises natural sciences and technology, but also involves “the political, social, and economic thought that enabled the development of technological know-how, as well as the thought tradition of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution (of which Marx was an integral part)” (Pohl 2018, 64). The corresponding “Chinese learning as function” refers to a specific Chinese form that both shapes and is shaped by the modernized social existence (Li 2018, 64).

Although Li’s understanding of the terms *ti* and *yong* contradicts that of Zhang Zhidong, there is a historical parallelism that provides them with a shared context. The year 1898 was a tumultuous and fervent one that culminated in the bold yet failed Hundred Days Reform (*wuxu bianfa* 戊戌變法). Similarly, 1986 was marked by the so-called “Cultural Fever” (*wenhua re* 文化熱) (that also includes the “Aesthetic Craze”—*meixue re* 美學熱), a period abounding in daring movements, such as the ‘85 New Wave that openly followed ideas of Western art. Li’s primary concern in this context is how to establish the most favourable way of incorporating both tradition and modernity in China. In both 1898 and 1986, China was at a crossroads. In both cases, there were widespread doubts about the efficacy and relevance of China’s heritage under the growing influx of foreign ideas. Questions of identity and the degree of opening up to the outside world prevailed. In both cases, the intellectual ferment was possible thanks to the period of short-lived political liberalization. Zhang Zhidong’s proposal of prioritizing “Chinese substance” and disjoining it from “Western application” became inscribed in the Chinese intellectual imagination. In contrast, Li advocated treating both as equal and, more importantly, inseparable. On the other hand, following

Lin's (1992) and Lambert's (2021) observations, it could be argued that it was Li Zehou's innovative reworking of *Zhong ti Xi yong* that underpinned Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic appeal to "cross the river by feeling the stones" (*mozhe shitou guo he* 摸著石頭過河).

Sungmoon Kim's Public Reason Confucianism

As Yutang Jin (2021) aptly observes, the diversity of contemporary Confucian political theories is due to different ways of understanding social change and assessing whether and how Confucianism can respond to social change. Jin further points out that this is but another iteration of "the age-long debate about 'substance' (*ti*) and 'function' (*yong*) in Chinese intellectual history" (Jin 2021, 18). Finally, he distinguishes between two main approaches among Confucian political theorists: the cultural and the intellectual. The cultural approach is represented by Confucian perfectionists such as Sungmoon Kim or Franz Mang. It takes Confucianism as a set of interconnected values, customs, and behaviours deeply ingrained in the cultural practices of contemporary East Asians. As such, Confucian perfectionist values need to be given serious consideration. The primary challenge is thus to find legitimate means of promoting them within the context of the modern state (*ibid.*, 4). The intellectual approach regards Confucianism predominantly as a system of thought upheld by an extensive intellectual tradition. The normative implications retrieved from this philosophical framework can potentially question the dominance of liberal democratic universalism in contemporary society (*ibid.*, 8). Jin divides the intellectual approach into revivalists and reconstructivists. The former, represented by Jiang Qing, strives to devise methods of reviving traditional Confucianism to tailor a concept of modernity suitable for East Asia. The latter, represented by Stephen Angle, Tongdong Bai, Daniel Bell, and Joseph Chan, while recognizing that traditional Confucian thought is no longer applicable to complex modern societies, remains optimistic about retrieving and adapting philosophical insights from Confucianism and their relevance for understanding contemporary issues. Nevertheless, both subgroups regard Confucianism as a system of thought upheld by an extensive intellectual tradition that can serve as a reservoir of normative challenge to the dominance of liberal democratic universalism. Concerning the "substance" (*ti*) and "function" (*yong*) framework, Li Zehou's idea of "Western substance and Chinese function" is represented by the cultural approach (*ibid.*, 18). Kim's conception of public reason Confucianism is a good example of how Li's principle can be applied in practice.

As Kim describes it, public reason Confucianism is a particular mode of Confucian democratic perfectionism that “best articulates the complex relationship between Confucian cultural values and Confucian democratic citizenship under the institutional constraints of democratic constitutionalism and within the normative parameters of democratic principles” (Kim 2016, 19). It aims to reconcile the existing diversity and value pluralism of East Asian societies with their assumed pervasive Confucian character. To achieve this goal, Kim creatively revises the Rawlsian concept of public reason to open it to the possibility of public reason perfectionism and, subsequently, to public reason Confucianism (ibid., 80).

While Jin does not elaborate on his idea further, his observation points to Kim’s public reason Confucianism as an example of the *Xi ti Zhong yong* principle. At the same time, he acknowledges the complex intellectual and historical background of contemporary Confucian investigations. At the very source of contemporary Confucian political thought lies the impetuous and often violent encounters with the West. According to David Stasavage (2020), China and Western Europe represent not just two different models of political development, but are “the starkest alternative” (Stasavage 2020, 138) in terms of how their political experiences unfolded. This modal polarity is the predominant reason why the encounter with the West resulted in a challenge unprecedented in Chinese history. At the beginning of the 20th century the generally undisputed role of Confucianism and Confucian political thought was questioned and criticized for its perceived role in China’s inability to modernize and resist Western and Japanese imperialism. Both liberals and communists deemed Confucianism “hopelessly outdated” (Elstein 2021, 490). Consequently, contemporary Confucian political philosophy took shape in a context of vulnerability and self-contestation. Confucianism was no longer the unwavering political ideology within a stable institutional framework, but instead needed to be re-established and re-imagined to respond to the influx of cultural, political, and philosophical challenges of Western modernity.

In recent years, the explicit discourse centred around the categories of “Westernization” and “Sinicization” has waned (Yu 2010, 183). Some researchers believe that, in times of globalization, we should discard old distinctions and replace them with “Complementary Substance and Complementary Function”, *hu ti hu yong* 互體互用 (Yu 2015). In other cases, the debate between *Zhong ti Xi yong* and *Xi ti Zhong yong* is considered to be no longer relevant (Yao 2019; Gao et al. 2016), or even responsible for stagnation in academia (Gao et al. 2016). However, the need to reconcile local and non-local institutional, cultural, or political elements is still a challenge in China and East Asia. The engagement with Western philosophical tradition is a defining feature of contemporary Confucian philosophy (Elstein 2021, 7), and the question of how to operationalize the relation between Western

and Chinese learning undergirds most of the contemporary political Confucian scholarship regardless of its stance. Even Jiang Qing (2013), an ardent proponent of reviving traditionalist Confucian political philosophy who emphasizes the importance of holding onto the original Confucian principles (Rošker 2015, 513), cannot but engage with ideas of Western provenance, even though he himself accuses such Confucian political reformers as Kang Youwei and Zhang Junmai of excessively internalizing Western constitutional principles (Jiang 2013, 46). While Jiang's goal is to present a modern form of a Confucian political order divorced from the influences of Western-style liberal democracy, he nevertheless has to engage with such concepts as constitutionalism or legitimacy.

The heterogeneity of Confucianism has led to the development of diverse ways of capturing the ever-changing aspects of the Confucian tradition. Apart from basic geography- or history-based classifications, a wide array of scholars have proposed taxonomies centred around the chosen method (Chan 2014), set goals (Angle 2012), the way the authors draw on Confucianism (Jin 2021), or the doctrine that serves as a reference point for Confucianism's self-transformation (Kim 2016).

According to Sungmoon Kim, Confucianism has been in the process of self-transformation throughout its whole history. What stimulates this constant evolution is the need and willingness to negotiate with doctrines that pose cultural, philosophical, or political challenges to Confucianism. Kim singles out the encounters with Legalism and Buddhism as the defining forces that first reshaped classical Confucianism into political Confucianism of the imperial period, and then redirected its interest toward metaphysics and moral psychology (Kim 2016, 242–43). Kim's proposal, public reason Confucianism, is also a result of such an encounter between Confucianism and liberal democracy.

Let us put aside the question of whether public reason Confucianism passes the test of feasibility and intelligibility (Angle 2019; Chan 2019; Wong 2019; Jin 2021), to be both philosophically significant and recognizable as belonging to the Confucian tradition. Regardless of the answer, Kim's theory remains a substantial voice in discussing how Confucian political theory can engage with liberal democracy. The hermeneutical lenses of *ti* and *yong* afford a more comprehensive understanding of how his proposal differs from other recent Confucian political theories that result from such an encounter (Angle 2012; Bai 2019; Chan 2014). In particular, it affords a way of understanding these differences regarding the internal structure of their engagement with the Western philosophical tradition.

At the very beginning, Kim acknowledges that external factors are responsible for the fact that the patterns of constitutional structure, political system, or public

identity in the political societies of East Asia have not emerged from within their own cultures (Kim 2021, 126). Moreover, traditional political institutions and patterns of public engagement are defunct, creating a vast political vacuum. Since Kim sees the traditional East Asian political culture as overlapping with Confucianism to a great extent, he claims that traditional Confucian institutions (such as one-man monarchy or political ritualism), as well as the resulting social divisions, are all but obsolete (Kim 2016, 24). In contrast to Confucian revivalists (e.g., Jiang 2013), Kim claims that the attempt to resuscitate these institutions would not only be undesirable but also impossible. The *circumstances of modern politics* characterized by value pluralism and moral disagreement (Kim 2016, 13) render the Confucian sage-king paradigm groundless.

Kim's observation coincides with Li Zehou's statement that "although the substance *ti* on which traditional politics and culture are based has gradually collapsed, many of its superstructural systems, values, and relationships still exist and became a huge habitual force". The traditional Confucian political institutions might be gone alongside the traditional ways of life, but such "deep structures of Confucianism" as the outlook on life or habits of thought (Li 2018, 216) are still in place. Li describes them as complex composites in which "desire, emotion, and reason (rational knowledge) reside in complex interrelation within a type of structure" (ibid.). Despite transformations and changes on the "surface level", the deep structures remain relatively stable since they are formed through a long process of "sedimentation"¹ (Rošker 2020a, 14–15). According to Kim, although traditional Confucian political institutions (such as one-man monarchy) have been at least partially superseded by the modern institution of citizenship (Kim 2016, 95), East Asian citizens are nonetheless *Confucian citizens* who are still under a penetrating and lasting influence of "Confucian mores and habits" (ibid., 67). Confucian citizens are thus put in a peculiar position. While they are deeply, although often unconsciously, entrenched in Confucian "habits of the heart" (Ivanhoe and Kim 2016), the circumstances of political, economic, and social life that conditioned these habits have almost entirely changed.

Instead, exogenous institutional elements (be they liberal democratic, or other) have been applied in a somewhat piecemeal and unintegrated way. The juxtaposition of the tentative institutional make-up and the shared Confucian way of how "ordinary men and women interact with themselves, think about moral questions, and make important political and legal decisions" (Kim 2021, 126) results in a cacophony that renders East Asian societies unintelligible to their citizens. In

1 Rošker (2020a) shows how the historical development of people's social and cultural life is akin to "the gradual layering of silt" that accumulates along riverbanks.

response to the needs and expectations of Confucian citizens, Kim proposes that the state should be allowed to “publicly promote a (characteristically) Confucian way of life” understood as “a constellation of values such as, but not limited to, filial piety, ritual propriety, respect for elders, ancestor worship, harmony within the (extended) family, and social harmony” (Kim 2016, 14). At the same time, core democratic values must be embraced non-instrumentally (ibid., 27). His scheme can be reframed according to the *ti-yong* framework, where the core values of democracy, such as popular sovereignty, political equality, and the right to political participation (ibid., 245), constitute the substance *ti*, while the constellation of underlying Confucian values constitutes its application *yong*.

According to Kim, the impact of modernity on the circumstances of politics in East Asia is indisputable. What, within the *ti-yong* framework, could be presented as *Zhong ti* is no longer plausible. Kim states that the “political theology of Heaven, the political ideal of sage-king, the moral metaphysics of virtue, and traditional Confucian political perfectionism” (Kim 2018, 10) have all become obsolete and no longer viable. The existing sociopolitical arrangements position East Asian citizens as equal and normatively diverse, even though their “lives are still significantly shaped by Confucian values, rituals, and social practice” (ibid., 9).

This argument can be illustrated by building upon the analogy used by Chengyang Li (2023) to describe different approaches to reconstructing Confucian philosophy. An ancient house needing renovation could be demolished and replaced with a new building. However, this would be detrimental to maintaining the inhabitants’ unique way of living, outlook on life, and habits of thought. Conversely, such an ancient house could be meticulously restored to its original form, including the no longer functional parts and possible faulty designs (Li 2023, 9). However, paraphrasing Kim, the circumstances of modern living require such basic amenities as running water or electricity. Only after introducing these substantial amenities does an ancient house become practically habitable, allowing its dwellers to pursue their Confucian-valenced lives.

The experience of “cacophony” is indeed a reformulation of the modernization challenges that East Asian societies, and China in particular, have faced since before the beginning of the 20th century. Kim’s solution for resolving this disharmony is consistent with Li Zehou’s recommendation to infuse “sedimented tradition” (*chuantong jidian* 傳統積澱) and “cultural-psychological formation” (*wenhua xinli jiegou* 文化心理結構) with the new consciousness, thus changing the “hereditary factors” (*yichuan jiyin de gaihuan* 遺傳基因的改換) and resulting in a change in “habits, functions, and appearances” (Li 1987, 27). Kim intends to give the regulative idea of public reason a distinctly Confucian form. By changing and rejecting

some of the Confucian “hereditary factors”, such as the monistic approach to ethics and politics or “the elitist aspect of Confucian meritocratic perfectionism” (Kim 2016, 14), Kim wants to offer a political proposal that satisfies three conditions. First, it should maintain a meaningful historical connection with traditional Confucianism (ibid., 15). Second, it could be recognized as distinctively Confucian by Confucian citizens. Third, it should nevertheless embrace the core democratic values non-instrumentally (ibid., 27). While Li postulates the transformation of everyday life in its political, economic, and social aspects according to Western patterns, Kim assumes that this change has already happened. What Kim calls the circumstances of modern politics are nothing else but the already modernized modes of living. From this perspective, it is only reasonable to subsequently subject the Confucian tradition to selection and transformation “on the basis of a new consciousness, shaped by a modernized social existence” (Pohl 2018, 65).

Yan Lianke’s Conception of Mythorealism Reinterpreted as “Western Substance and Chinese Application”

As likely happened to all regional and local literatures worldwide, Chinese literature in the past century dramatically transformed itself through the reception and appropriation of outside influences. This was also the case with literary theory, and turbulent episodes of Chinese history led to a few momentous years of Cultural Fever, during which “in a short span of five or six years, roughly fifty- or sixty-years’ worth of Western theories were introduced to Chinese readers” (Zhang 1992). The influx of new and foreign ideas coincided with the peak interest in Li Zehou’s work. Eventually, the overzealous application of Western methods to the analysis of Chinese humanities inspired a self-reflection on the specific Chinese subjectivity of literary works and theory. As a side-effect, this sudden backlash against Western theory may have influenced the critical reception and misconstruction of Li’s idea of *Xi ti Zhong yong*. The same phenomena could serve as an explanation for why the notion of the “Chinese School” of literary theory first put forward in Hong Kong and Taiwan was so warmly received in Mainland China in the mid-1990s (Dan and Zhou 2006).

One of the most acclaimed contemporary Chinese novelists, whose works include literary critique and theory, is Yan Lianke, and while he does not claim to represent the comparatist school mentioned above, his theory of mythorealism also takes Chinese particularity as a starting point. Yan himself coined the term mythorealism, and for this reason it is sometimes mistakenly described as a writing strategy that only he applies. However, Yan refutes this misconception by stating:

[...] Chinese literature already contains a body of writing that diverges from both nineteenth-century realism and twentieth-century modernism. This overlooked literature is precisely what I am calling mythorealism. (Yan 2022)

Mythorealism is a new literary mode that strives to touch upon the so-called “reality of the inner soul” (*linghun shendu zhenshi* 靈魂深度真實) to create and transform the objective and social. Yan distinguishes four types of reality. Apart from the reality of the inner soul, he also names the “reality of social construction” (*shehui konggou zhenshi* 社會控構真實), the “reality of worldly experiences” (*shixiang jingyan zhenshi* 世相經驗真實), and the “reality of life experiences” (*shengming jingyan zhenshi* 生命經驗真實). In this sense, the relation between “nonrealist”/“suprarealist”/“non-realist” and “realist” in mythorealistic writing may reproduce the dynamics of *ti* and *yong* intended by Li Zehou. The “inner soul”, both on an individual and collective scale, may involve myths, legends, fantasy, and spirituality. Those are the things that partly shape the “Chinese function” as a part of traditional culture and “Chinese learning” (*zhongxue* 中學).

Social construction, worldly experiences, and life experiences are the realities that Yan Lianke believes to be “the biggest cemetery of literature” (Yan 2004). Yet the reality of the inner soul that mythorealism pursues grows out of social reality (Yan 2022, 99). In this sense, modernization (*ti*) and widely-defined “Chinese experiences” (*yong*) (ibid., 104) are mutually redefining themselves, creating a kind of synergy that could be interpreted in a similar manner in which Li considers *ti* and *yong* inseparable, *ti yong bu er* 體用不二.

Interestingly enough, since Yan does not name any foreign works that could fit the definition of mythorealism, the new optics is, in fact, a “Chinese application” of external literary paradigms. The “Chinese application” of mythorealism, however, is no longer for a China at the crossroads. It sets off to explore the already transformed Chinese reality, which “possesses unprecedented complexity, absurdity, and richness” (ibid., 100). This new reality is partly a side effect of the unprecedented pace and scope of Chinese development after 1978. Interest in the often disconcerting results of this drastic socio-economic transformation is common for many works that Yan considers to be examples of mythorealism. In his own writing, the entrapment of individuals and communities by the unrelenting logic of the new system is a recurring theme. The author often resorts to mythorealism to illustrate specific social conditions observed in China. For example, in *The Explosion Chronicles* (2018b) Yan problematizes China’s economic development by condensing temporality (Cao 2016)—a fantastical curve of time represents the almost unlikely pace of many infrastructure projects developed in China in the first decade of this century.

According to Lambert (2021), the theorization of the relationship between humans and productive forces is one of Li Zehou's requirements for aesthetics. This premise of Li's thought on aesthetics may not be just a coincidental similarity to Yan's social engagement, but also another thread linking *Xi ti Zhong Yong* and mythorealism.

After receiving strong criticism of his idea, Li Zehou underlined the short-sightedness of the uncritical acceptance of Western solutions. In his view, "gradual transformation (improvement rather than revolution) is exactly what the position 'Western substance, Chinese application' stands for" (Li 2004). Similarly, Yan Lianke also does not consider Western theory a ready-made paradigm:

For the past three decades, contemporary Chinese literature's repeated attempts to borrow techniques and characteristics from various branches of Western literary modernism demonstrate that sometimes Western literary trends and local Chinese experiences don't necessarily accord with one another. (Yan 2022, 104)

While some authors position China and the West in a dichotomic manner and consequently define *ti* and *yong* as two different realms, Li considers them binary, and thus inseparable (*ti yong bu er* 體用不二). *Ti yong bu er* may be seen as the principle of mythorealism not only regarding its position on the relation between reality and fiction, but also on balancing local and foreign influences. If we agree to interpret mythorealism as a form of "Chinese application", then we can set Yan Lianke in line with Li Zehou in this context, as can be seen in the following paragraph:

Contemporary mythoreal writing cannot separate itself from the influence of twentieth-century world literature. [...] This principle also applies to literature, and just as mythorealism cannot separate itself from Chinese tradition and create a world out of nothing, it similarly cannot separate itself from world literature's modernist writing and attain a completely autonomous existence. (ibid., 113)

There is also no priority given to foreign influences, namely Western modernism, "not at all inferior to nourishment from the Chinese tradition" (ibid., 114). The dynamics of West-China relations within the framework of mythorealism position both sides in a manner similar to that of Li Zehou: outside influences are inspirations that lead to different objectives and directions, since the initial forces were significantly different. The dynamics of modernization, according to "Western learning as substance", is such that it draws from its own sources. At the same time, it absorbs useful inspirations from Chinese culture.

Even if the parallels between Chinese literary tradition and *Zhong xue* seem too far-fetched, Yan does not provide any contemporary factor shaping local literature that could be specifically indigenous.² Yan believes mythorealism is the best way to reach the “new truth” and “new reality”. Mythorealism is thus both a conceptual framework and an epistemological tool. In any case, Western forms of literary expression are realized with reference to Chinese tradition in order to fully realize the potential of China’s particularity. This is where Yan Lianke’s mythorealism and Li Zehou’s *Xi ti Zhong yong* meet.

Conclusion

We claim that the attempt to enhance the interpretational potential of *Xi ti Zhong yong* represents a form of engagement in cross-disciplinary perspectives in research on contemporary China and the complexities of Li Zehou’s thought. Even some of Li’s less elaborated ideas provide an interesting theoretical tool that applies to areas with which he was always concerned, such as politics, art, and Chineseness. Li’s ability to move smoothly within and beyond the paradigm makes his proposal relevant even though after publishing “Random Thoughts on ‘Western Learning as Substance, Chinese Learning as Application’” he gradually moved away from discussions about the balance between Westernization and Sinicization. Although Li did not intend *Xi ti Zhong yong* as a methodological tool but rather as a manifesto for the future direction of China, there is no reason not to extend his idea to other potential applications. We have shown that *Xi ti Zhong yong* is a fruitful interpretative framework highlighting the internal structure of the two analysed theories. Moreover, it provides a unifying perspective for them even though they may appear quite distinct. Our findings serve as the basis for further examination of how *Xi ti Zhong yong* can be reinterpreted in light of the presented applications in literary and political theory.

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² Yan remains mysteriously silent on Chinese socialist realism, and some possible explanations for this are provided by Ma (2022).

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Pojęcie literatury światowej w Chinach: Zarys historyczny oraz tendencje współczesne

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Abstrakt:

Współczesne dyskusje nad zagadnieniem literatury światowej nierzadko skupiają się na mechanizmach władzy i przepływu dzieł kultury w skali globalnej. W tej pokojowej rywalizacji kultury narodowe oraz lokalne dążą bądź do zwiększenia swojego wpływu bądź przeformułowania zasad zdobywania szerszego uznania. Interesującym przykładem w tym kontekście są Chiny, które, mimo rosnącego wpływu na otoczenie międzynarodowe, rzadko kiedy są kojarzone z produkcjami kulturalnymi o znaczącym oddziaływaniu.

Niniejszy artykuł zarysowuje historię pojęcia literatury światowej w Chinach, a także przedstawia kierunki współcześnie toczonych debat. W dyskursie tym wyraźnie dostrzegalne są podobieństwa pomiędzy rozważaniami literaturoznawczymi a wizją świata promowaną przez oficjalne organy państwowe. Równie wyraźnie zaznaczona jest dychotomia Chiny-Zachód (中西 *Zhong Xi*).

Słowa kluczowe: literatura światowa; literatura chińska; historia literatury; komparatystyka literacka; literatura sinofoniczna

A historical outline and contemporary tendencies in debating the concept of World Literature in China

Abstract:

Contemporary debates over world literature often examine the mechanisms of power and the circulation of cultural works on a global scale. In this symbolic contest, national and local cultures either strive to expand their influence or seek to redefine the rules for gaining broader recognition. China offers an intriguing case in point: despite its growing global standing, it is rarely associated with contemporary cultural output of any significant global impact.

This article outlines the history of the notion of world literature in China and presents some of the most prominent directions of ongoing debates. A closer look at these discourses reveals striking parallels between literary scholarship and the worldview promoted by the party-state apparatus. Equally commonplace is the framing of local literature within the China-West (中西 *Zhong Xi*) dichotomy, with the two poles symbolizing contrasting tendencies, either opening up to external influences or relying on the legacy of traditional culture.

Keywords: World Literature; Chinese Literature; Literary History; Comparative Literature; Sinophone Literature

Literatura światowa, mimo nieustannie toczących się dyskusji na temat definicji i implikacji tego pojęcia, stała się powszechnie stosowaną ramą dla dyskusji na temat współczesnych zjawisk literackich. W pewnym stopniu to właśnie nieostrość tego terminu sprzyja jego karierze. Sta(wa)nie się częścią literatury światowej ma charakter wartościujący, a sama fraza nierzadko implikuje nadzieję, że dany tekst literacki spotka się z należnym uznaniem poza granicami rodzimej kultury. Z drugiej strony *world literature* może stanowić etykietkę, z której korzystamy, by dokonać homogenizacji całego bogactwa tekstów znajdujących się poza oswojonymi kanonami.

W toku międzynarodowej debaty zainicjowana na przełomie wieków i trwająca do dziś poczyniono ogromne postępy w radzeniu sobie z ambiwalencjami literatury światowej. Przytoczone powyżej przykłady potocznego rozumienia terminu nie dają wglądu w bogactwo dyskusji, która uczyniła z *World Literature Studies*

¹ subdyscyplinę literaturoznawstwa. Przemysław Czapliński (2014) w znakomitym tekście zarysującym najważniejsze tendencje w dyskusji na temat literatury światowej, zawęża jej rozumienie do trzech głównych obszarów: zbioru dzieł, poetyki oraz sposobu czytania.

¹ Już sam sposób zapisu pojęcia w języku angielskim stwarza problemy interpretacyjne, które w dużej mierze nie znajdują odzwierciedlenia w polskim dyskursie. „World Literature” pisane wielkimi literami wskazuje na oddzielny problem teoretyczny (por. Tihanov 2024), „world literature” odnosi się z kolei do korpusu dzieł funkcjonujących poza granicami rodzimej kultury. „World-literature” sugeruje inspiracje „świato-systemem” / „systemem światowym” (world-system) Immanuela Wallersteina. W tym kluczu istnieje jeden system literacki, którego nieuniknioną właściwością są nierówności. Pewne obszary pełnią funkcję centrum, pozostałe zaś – peryferiów i pół-peryferiów. Te drugie pozostają w relacji zależności od centrów. Takie „przypuszczenie” wyraził Franco Moretti (2000). Z kolei omawiany w tym tekście chiński badacz Wang Ning postuluje rozróżnienie na literaturę światową w liczbie pojedynczej i liczbie mnogiej (*literatury światowe*). W jego ujęciu liczba pojedyncza odnosi się do uniwersalnego kryterium oceny „literatury o największym znaczeniu” (Wang Ning 2010), w liczbie mnogiej – do „różnorodnych reprezentacji literatur wszystkich krajów” (ibid.).

Dyskusje na temat literatury światowej stworzyły wymóg (ponownego) określenia, co należy rozumieć przez „światowość”. W dużym uproszczeniu można stwierdzić, że globalizacja i rosnący wpływ teorii postkolonialnej przyczyniły się do bezprecedensowego poszerzenia paradygmatu dyscypliny o literatury kultur zamieszkujących półkulę południową i wschodnią. Proces ten już nieco wcześniej miał swoje dość nieśmiałe początki. Choć w drugiej połowie XX wieku z obszarów wyobrazonego centrum² pojawiały się głosy o konieczności całkowitego odejścia od myślenia o literaturze za pomocą zachodnio-centrycznych kanonów (za przykład mógłby posłużyć francuski komparatysta René Etiemble, por. Sayeh 2013), to literaturoznawstwo musiało się otwartości niejako nauczyć. Często wymienianym w tym kontekście przypadkiem jest wpływowa antologia wydawnictwa Norton, prezentująca dorobek literatury światowej. Od pierwszego wydania w 1956 musiało minąć prawie cztery dekady, zanim antologia doczekała się uzupełnienia o literatury spoza Europy i Ameryki Północnej (Czapliński 2014).

Można argumentować, że dopiero to paradoksalne „otwarcie na świat” rozumienia literatury światowej wyprowadziło chińską literaturę poza sinologiczną niszę. Nie wydarza się to w próżni: obecność kultur azjatyckich na globalnej mapie w dużej mierze odzwierciedla rosnącą rolę tych państw w świecie. W przypadku Chin wielu rodzimych badaczy wierzy, że pozycja tego kraju powinna bezpośrednio determinować znaczenie tzw. chińskiego dyskursu, wyrażającego się również w obszarze literatury i humanistyki. Interpretacja ta, ocierająca się o sinocentryzm³ i wiążąca oddziaływanie kultury z politycznymi relacjami międzynarodowymi, stanowi nowszą, acz nie jedyną odsłonę tego, w jaki sposób konceptualizowane jest pojęcie literatury światowej w Chinach. Niniejszy esej jest próbą zaprezentowania przekroju debat nad zagadnieniem, zarówno historycznych, jak i najbardziej aktualnych. Moglibyśmy sparafrazować Edwarda Saída i nazwać dyskusje o „literaturze światowej” aktem *wędrowania teorii* („travelling theory”, Said 1983, 226), co odzwierciedlałoby sumę przekładów tego pojęcia w określonych kontekstach i momentach

² O takim centrum mówiła Pascale Casanova (2004), przypisując ośrodkom kulturalnym (przykładowo, w XIX wieku miał być to Paryż) zdolność do wyznaczania literackich standardów estetycznych na skalę globalną. Kolejnym przykładem jest przytoczony wyżej Franco Moretti, który wskazywał na wpływ, jaki wraz z rozprzestrzenianiem się kapitalizmu, wywierała europejska powieść. „Wyobrażone centrum” zatem oznaczałoby ośrodek bądź krąg kulturowy mający wiodący autorytet w zakresie „konsekrowania” dzieł literackich.

³ Niektórzy chińscy badacze powielają w kontekście Chin i reszty Azji Wschodniej krytykowaną wizję Morettiego, dzielącą świat na centra i peryferie (Zhang Longxi 2013, poddane krytyce w: Kim Dong-Wook 2022)

historycznych (Forsdick 2011). W niniejszym tekście podejmuję próbę odtworzenia przynajmniej części tych wędrówek dyskursywnych, jakie w ostatnich latach dokonały się w Chinach.

W prezentowanym przeglądzie skupiam się na Chińskiej Republice Ludowej, a w ujęciach sprzed 1949 roku – na dyskusjach toczących się w końcowych latach Chin cesarskich i Republiki Chińskiej. Nie oznacza to jednak oddania głosu wyłącznie badaczom chińskim, a raczej uznania Chin, tamtejszej literatury i wzajemnych relacji tych dwóch „obiektów” z literaturą światową za temat główny. Porządek podejmowania różnych ujęć nie zawsze jest chronologiczny: staram się podążać osią historyczno-literacką, zestawiając ją z nowymi badaniami na temat danego okresu.

Dotychczasowe polskojęzyczne piśmiennictwo akademickie poświęcone trajektorii idei literatury światowej w Chinach wciąż pozostawia wiele aspektów niezbadanymi i nieopisanymi. Za wyjątek posłużyć może niedawny tekst Thomasa Starky’ego (2021), zestawiający mapowanie literatury światowej na wzór „światowej republiki literackiej” Pascale Casanovy z zainteresowaniem, jakie gigant chińskiej literatury współczesnej Lu Xun (鲁迅) okazywał „literaturom peryferyjnym”, z pominięciem domniemanych centrów literackich. W pracy z 2000 roku, Lidia Kasarełło wnikliwie opisuje wpływ literatury obcej i przekładów na środowisko twórcze w Chinach w latach osiemdziesiątych, okresie, który przede wszystkim kojarzy się z tak zwaną „gorączką kulturową” (文化熱 *wenhua re*). Choć opracowanie to jest z pewnością najdokładniejszym opisem „wiązań zewnętrznych” (2000, 61-69), to literatura światowej nie zostaje w nim wyróżniona jako oddzielna kategoria, co staram się uczynić w tym przeglądzie. W tym miejscu należy również wspomnieć prace z zakresu komparatystyki, literatury światowej i transferu idei autorstwa Adama Koli (2012, wzmianki także w artykule z 2014), które nie skupiają się jednak na chińskiej perspektywie, a jedynie wpisują chiński obszar cywilizacyjny w szerszy kontekst dyscypliny.

Współczesna debata nad literaturą światową w Chinach za ważny punkt odniesienia uznaje najbardziej wpływowe w ostatnich dekadach koncepcje Franco Morettiego, Pascale Casanovy, a także – w nieco innym tonie – Davida Damroscha. Zastrzeżenie dotyczące tego ostatniego badacza wynika z faktu, że damroschowski „sposób czytania” jako klucz do ujmowania literatury światowej spotyka się z życzliwością chińskich badaczy, w przeciwieństwie do kontestowanych geografii kulturowych nakreślonych przez Morretiego i Casanovę (przykład takiej krytyki: Ling i Yang 2019). Zauważalne jest jednak pewne

rozdarciu: o ile metaforyka centrum i peryferii budzi sprzeciw jako sprzeczna z duchem uniwersalizmu bądź jako podział narzucony przez kręgi zachodnie, to peryferyjność chińskiej literatury⁴ pozostaje przedmiotem troski i rozważań prawie każdego badacza z tego kraju, podejmującego temat literatury światowej. Na dyskusję o nierównościach w globalnym przepływie kultury i idei wpływać może zestaw znacznie szerszy niż propozycja literackiego systemu-świata czy „literackiego południka zero”. Jednak ta dwójka wymienionych badaczy jest często postrzegana w Chinach jako przedstawiciele myślenia o literaturze światowej, od którego należy odchodzić.

Jak odnotował Chen Sihe (陈思和), badacz znany w Chinach między innymi dzięki koncepcji poszukiwania elementów globalnych w literaturze chińskiej, w dwudziestym wieku literatura chińska wyszła ze stanu izolacji i „ze wszech stron zalały ją obce nurty kulturowe”. Okoliczności te wymagają „dekonstrukcji i podważenia” dotychczasowych metod badawczych (Chen 2000). Uwagi te stanowiły wezwanie do nowego odczytania historii literatury ubiegłego stulecia, ale też zarysowały podstawowy kontekst myślenia o relacjach między literaturą chińską a literaturą światową. Przez długi czas większość wysiłków badawczych zmierzała w kierunku opisanie tych dwóch instytucji oddzielnie, w spektrum dwubiegunowego dualizmu świata i Chin, w najbardziej skrajnym (choć nierzadkim) ujęciu – świata-inspiratora i Chin-naśladowcy. W ramach swojej dekonstrukcji, Chen prześledził pewne zjawiska w XX wiecznej literaturze chińskiej, by opisać je na nowo nie jako „wpływy”, a tendencje uniwersalne dla danego czasu – globalne elementy (世界性因素 *shijixing yinsu*). Podobna propozycja zastąpienia „wpływów” kategorią „odpowiedzi” na obce nurty estetyczne wysunięta została także przez Zhu Jianguo (2022).

Jing Tsu w pracy *Sound and Script in Chinese Diaspora* ukazuje okoliczności sformułowania pierwszych uwag o literaturze światowej w kontekście chińskim. W 1898 roku Chen Jitong (陈季同), dyplomata schyłku epoki Qing i pierwszy chiński pisarz frankofoński, chciał wykorzystać „literaturę świata” (世界的文学 *shijie de wenxue*) do tworzenia przestrzeni dla prezentacji dyskursu o Chinach w okresie egzystencjalnego zagrożenia dla ciągłości

⁴ Nie tylko samej literatury, a wręcz, ujmując szerzej, chińskiej teorii literatury, chińskich dokonań w humanistyce i „chińskiej władzy dyskursywnej” (*huayuquan* 话语权) – to ostatnie pojęcie stanowi część słownika aparatu państwowego; „dyskursywna władza” rozumiana jest jako zdolność do prezentowania aktorom zewnętrznym chińskiego punktu widzenia. „Chińska władza dyskursywna” stała się pojęciem promowanym przez samego Xi Jinpinga, w związku z czym doczekała się także rozważań w kontekście literatury, przykładowo Jin (2018).

politycznej tego państwa. Motywem dla upolitycznienia pola literatury, jakiego dokonał Chen, były „polityczne i prawne próby przekształcenia przestrzeni globalnej na korzyść Chin” (Jing 2010, 113), co może nasuwać skojarzenia z obecnymi zmianami porządku międzynarodowego, uznawanymi przez chińskich badaczy za ważny kontekst dla odchodzenia od eurocentryzmu. Wzmianki Chena, mimo jego zrozumienia dla ówczesnych relacji między literaturą a prestiżem państwa, które potencjalnie reprezentowała, nie miały jednakże usystematyzowanego charakteru.

Pierwszej próby teoretycznego ujęcia zagadnienia podjął się Zheng Zhenduo (郑振铎) w artykule *Pogląd na zjednoczenie literatury* (*Wenxue de tongyi guan* 文学的统一观) z 1922 roku⁵. Poprzez analogię do innych dyscyplin nauki, zarówno humanistycznych (filozofia), jak i ścisłych (geologia), Zheng wskazywał na potrzebę rozpoczęcia uniwersalistycznych studiów nad literaturą. Podstaw ku temu poszukiwał we wspólnocie ludzkich doświadczeń: przeżywania takich samych emocji, powszechnych dążeń do lepszego życia, wolności duchowej itd. (Zheng 2014, 61). Jak odnotowuje Liu (2018), taka linia rozumowania wpisuje się w szersze poszukiwania wspólnego gruntu dla literatury chińskiej i literatury obcej. Znalezienie takich punktów odniesienia stanowić miało wręcz „pragnienie” (Ibid., 288) wielu przedstawicieli Ruchu Czwartego Maja (1919–1921)⁶. Ruch ten, w piśmiennictwie również jako część szerszego i wcześniej zapoczątkowanego Ruchu Nowej Kultury (*Xin Wenhua Yundong* 新文化运动), zapamiętany został w historii literatury chińskiej jako czas wyjątkowego otwarcia na obce literatury, jak pokazuje Starky (2021) – nie tylko te wywodzące się z europejskiego „centrum”. Poczucie zagrożenia egzystencjalnego również przekładało się na wysyp numerów specjalnych czasopism literackich oraz antologii poświęconych „małym, słabym i zranionym narodom”, m.in.: Polakom, Czechom, Węgrom, Bułgarom, Turkom, Koreańczykom, rdzennym Amerykanom (Tsu 2010). Ważna praca Karen Thornber z 2009 roku *Empire of texts in motion: Chinese, Korean, and Taiwanese transculturations of Japanese literature* potwierdza, że literatura zachodnia stanowiła tylko jeden z punktów odniesienia, a porównywalny wpływ wywierały wzajemne kontakty między pisarzami chińskimi, tajwańskimi, japońskimi

⁵ Tekst został opublikowany z adnotacją: „Jest to starsza rzecz sprzed roku. Jestem obecnie zbyt zajęty, by zredagować ją na nowo. Dość dużo cytuję z *Literatury Światowej* Moultona, któremu jestem bardzo wdzięczny”.

⁶ Sama nazwa ruchu nawiązuje do protestów przeciw ustaleniom traktatu wersalskiego, które przekazywały Shandong Japonii. Na poziomie kulturalnym ruch ten sprzeciwiał się konfucjańskiej tradycji. W historii literatury ruch utożsamia się z narodzinami współczesnej literatury chińskiej, choć jest to nieco uproszczona interpretacja, która doczekała się już zakwestionowania (Wang 1997).

i koreańskimi. Tę przestrzeń kontaktu Thornber nazwała „mgławicami (nebulą) kontaktów literackich” (*literary contacts nebulae*). Pojęciem tym zastąpiła „strefę kontaktu” promowaną przez Mary Louise Pratt (np. 2008) jako lepiej oddające transkulturowy charakter sieci łączących pisarzy, czytelników i uczonych, lepiej wyrażający wzajemność ich relacji. Ponadto „mgławice”, zdaniem Thornber, w mniejszym stopniu zawierają roszczenia do autorytatywności (Thornber 2009, 19). „Wewnątrz-wschodnioazjatyckie mgławice kontaktów literackich” dają impuls do definiowania literatury światowej (w tym wypadku – azjatyckiej) w odniesieniu do jej oddziaływania regionalnego, w przeciwieństwie do dominujących wcześniej ujęć globalnych. Jest to o tyle znaczące, że owe ujęcia globalne z zasady odtwarzają globalne nierówności. Jak zauważa Thornber w innym tekście (2017):

Na tej samej zasadzie tekst w jednym z języków azjatyckich, pomimo tłumaczeń na inne języki azjatyckie, ale już nie zachodnie, generalnie nie będzie określany mianem literatury światowej, natomiast tekst w jednym z języków europejskich, szeroko rozpowszechniony w Europie, ale bez tłumaczeń na języki nieeuropejskie, nawet dziś będzie uznawany za literaturę światową⁷.

Po ustanowieniu Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej w 1949 roku, w latach 50- i 60- dyskusja na temat literatury światowej została podporządkowana sowieckiej koncepcji „progresywnej literatury światowej”, zaproponowanej w 1954 roku przez Nikołaja Tichonowa⁸. Wizja ta dzieliła literaturę światową na kręgi według stopnia przyswojenia technik i poetyki realizmu socjalistycznego. W systemie tym Chiny zostały zakwalifikowane do grona „demokracji ludowych”, a ich literatura do drugiego kręgu. Jak nietrudno się domyśleć, „słońcem” układu był Kraj Rad, a do najbardziej progresywnego kręgu zaliczono literaturę krajów bezpośrednio podległych Związkowi Radzieckiemu, w tym Polski (Liu 2010). Przejawem odchodzenia od tej „szowinistycznej” (ibid.) tendencji było przekwalifikowanie literatury chińskiej na przedstawicielkę „literatury Wschodu” i nacisk na pojęcie „kultury narodowej” (*minzu wenhua* 民族文化), zaprezentowane przez delegatów chińskich na Afro-Azjatyckiej Konferencji Pisarzy w Taszkencie w 1958 roku (Vanhove 2019). W 1962 roku, w trakcie drugiego zjazdu

⁷ Tłumaczenie Małgorzata Nowak, za Bilczewski T., Hejmej A., Rajewska E. (red.). *Historie i teorie nowoczesnej komparatystyki od szkoły amerykańskiej do biohumanistyki*, s. 929-930.

⁸ Przed 1949 rokiem literaturę rosyjską włączano w Chinach do szerokiego zbioru literatury zachodniej.

w Kairze jego uczestnicy położyli nacisk na budowanie światowości literatury przez przekład. Dokonali tego na długo przed translatorskim zwrotem w humanistyce i uwzniośnieniem aktu przekładu, jakiego dokonał David Damrosch, przekonujący, że literatura światowa to literatura, która zyskuje poprzez tłumaczenie (Damrosch 2003). Język rezolucji w tej sprawie odzwierciedlał ówczesny klimat geopolityczny: „Imperialiści tłumaczą w oparciu o własne interesy, całkowicie sprzeczne z interesami cywilizacji afro-azjatyckich”. W odpowiedzi tłumaczenie miało stać się narzędziem do budowania postkolonialnej literatury światowej (Vanhove 2019, s. 152).

Bezprecedensowy okres “reform i otwarcia” (1979–2012), jaki nastąpił po dziesięcioletnim okresie chaosu Rewolucji Kulturalnej (1966–1976), wraz z ponownym otwarciem na świat przyniósł zmianę paradygmatu literaturoznawstwa i powrót pojęcia literatury światowej. Hasłem przyświecającym rozwojowi w latach osiemdziesiątych było „zmierzenie ku światu” (*zouxiang shijie* 走向世界⁹), w kontekście chińskiej literatury rozumiane jako „dołączanie do literatury światowej/zmierzenie ku literaturze światowej” (*zouxiang shijie wenxue* 走向世界文学). Gorliwe nadganie dekad zaległości, jakie wystąpiły w naukach ścisłych i humanistyce łączyło się z kwestionowanymi dziś dwoma założeniami, jakie przyświecały ówczesnym debatom. Po pierwsze, „dołączeniu do literatury światowej” towarzyszyło przeświadczenie, że chińska literatura pozostaje „na zewnątrz” kultury świata, po drugie – rozwój chińskiej literatury miał się dokonać przez przyswajanie tropów literatur obcych postrzeganych jako „zaawansowane”. Kwestię twórczości literackiej i jej obecności w świecie ujmowano zatem jako proces linearny i ściśle powiązany ze stopniem modernizacji danego kraju.

Motyw ten – powiązanie literatury ze stojącą za nią kulturą, a w pewnych redukcjonistycznych interpretacjach państwem – jedynie umocnił się wraz ze wzrostem znaczenia Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej w świecie. Charakterystycznym zwrotem interdyscyplinarnym stało się łączenie literaturoznawstwa ze stosunkami międzynarodowymi. Cao Shunqing (曹顺庆), proponent szeroko komentowanych w Chinach studiów nad wariacjami w komparatyście literackiej (*bijiao wenxue bianyi lunxue* 比较文学变异论学) formułując swoją teorię wielokrotnie odwoływał się do prac Samuela Huntingtona (Cao 2013),

⁹ Poetyka “zmierzenia” pozostaje stale obecna w chińskim dyskursie, nawet jeżeli nowym celem staje się, między innymi, ugruntowanie chińskiej teorii literatury w świecie (Li 2019).

amerykańskiego politologa, autora głośnej pracy *Zderzenie cywilizacji* z 1996 roku¹⁰. W zaproponowanym przez Cao modelu wariacje stanowią podstawową jednostkę badań literaturoznawczych, którą zastosować można zarówno w kontekście różnic w przekładzie wynikających z odmiennych właściwości morfologicznych danej pary języków, jak i porównywaniu transferu kulturowego pomiędzy różnymi cywilizacjami; przykładowo, rozumienie pojęcia „nauka” w Azji i w świecie zachodnim. Przepływ idei w świecie w ujęciu Cao odbywa się na drodze translacji i adaptacji, czego nieuniknioną konsekwencją stają się wspomniane wariacje. Koncepcja ta ma służyć stworzeniu epistemologii alternatywnej wobec zachodniego uniwersalizmu i literatury światowej, którą cechować będzie „harmonia bez uniformizacji” (Cao 2013).

Wang Ning (王宁), jeden z lepiej znanych chińskich teoretyków współczesnej literatury, w artykule programowym promującym ideę poetyki światowej otwarcie podkreśla współzależność kultury i państwa-tworu politycznego (2024): „w nowej erze, w której Chiny są drugą gospodarką świata z szybko rozwijającą się nauką i technologią, produkcja kulturalna i literacka powinna dotrzymać tempa zmianom, by odpowiadać statusowi głównego światowego gracza”¹¹. Tak jak kanon wartościuje określone teksty kultury, tak literatura światowa od początku konceptualizacji tego pojęcia nie ma neutralnego charakteru. Odzwierciedla ona relacje władzy i oddziaływanie kultur. *Novum* chińskiego ujęcia nie leży zatem w założeniach, a w ich radykalnym traktowaniu. Polityczność literatury światowej w tamtejszym dyskursie w ostatnich latach coraz silniej splata się z narracjami i wizją świata promowaną przez władze państwowe. Tendencja ta zyskiwała w ostatnich latach na sile wraz z umacnianiem się władzy Xi Jinpinga¹². Krótkie teksty na łamach mediów państwowych, w których hasła partyjne łączą się z pojęciem literatury światowej, możemy uznać za rodzaj obowiązku niektórych badaczy ściślej związanych ze specyficznym upaństwowionym

¹⁰ W chińskim dyskursie akademickim nie brakuje spojrzenia na literaturę w kategoriach znanej ze stosunków międzynarodowych wielobiegowości (Fang 2016) czy inspirowanych Huntingtonem prób tworzenia mapy literatury światowej w oparciu o kręgi cywilizacyjne (Ma 2013).

¹¹ Warto zwrócić jednak uwagę, że koncepcje chińskich badaczy równocześnie promują modele i sposoby ujmowania literatury światowej w kategoriach utopijnej równości i harmonii, obojętnej na uwarunkowania (geo)polityczne – przykładem przytoczona w tekście głównym poetyka światowa.

¹² Postać Przewodniczącego ChRL i dynamika wspomnianego procesu nie są tematem niniejszego artykułu. W Polsce na ten temat pisał szeroko np. Bogdan Góralczyk (2022).

establishmentem literackim¹³. Okoliczności te w żaden sposób nie przeczą jednak faktycznym próbom przełożenia sloganów Przewodniczącego ChRL na język teorii literatury.

Z tego nazbyt może pobieżnego zarysu wyłania się dwubiegunowa dynamika naprzemiennych okresów większego otwarcia na wpływy zewnętrzne oraz wzmożonej wiary w postęp napędzany bogactwem własnej tradycji i dziedzictwa. Bliższe pierwszej tendencji są pierwsza połowa XX wieku, okres ideologicznej podległości względem Związku Radzieckiego oraz pierwsze dwadzieścia lat okresu pomaoistowskiego (1976-ok. 1995). Okres większej asertywności widoczny jest w ostatnich 30 latach, a także w pierwszej połowie lat sześćdziesiątych poprzedniego stulecia. Zeng Jun (曾军) w 2018 roku opisał ten cykl przyjmowania i odrzucania wpływów zewnętrznych jako dwie przeciwstawne struktury emocjonalne. Zasugerował on istnienie dwóch orientacji: pierwsza uznaje przepływ idei (często pochodzących z „kolektywnego Zachodu”) za obiektywną i niejako naturalną cechę zglobalizowanego świata, druga zaś przestrzega przed westernizacją i kolonizacją intelektualną chińskiej humanistyki.

Prace nad włączeniem politycznych sloganów „chińskiego snu” (中国梦 *Zhongguomeng*, China Dream) i „wspólnoty ludzkiej związanej przeznaczeniem” (人类命运共同体 *renlei mingyun gongtongti*, Community of Common Destiny) do słownika literatury nie stanowią, na szczęście, jedyne pomysły na „uświatowienie” chińskiej literatury. Pojęciem brzmiącym być może obco w polskim kontekście, lecz ugruntowanym w dyscyplinie, jest „literatura sinofoniczna”, czy też „chińsko-sinofoniczna”, jak zaproponował to jeden z najaktywniejszych badaczy w tym obszarze, Zhang Yingjin (Fiss 2023). Kategoria literatury, czy też twórczości, sinofonicznej (chińskojęzycznej) stanowi odpowiedź na rosnące zainteresowanie sinicko-języcznymi wspólnotami i ich kulturą. W ramach wyznaczenia granic tego zjawiska o skali globalnej, możemy wyznaczyć pewne umowne obszary sinofoniczności: Hongkong, Tajwan, Singapur, Makau, czy też obecne w wielu miejscach na świecie wielopokoleniowe społeczności diasporyczne chińskiego pochodzenia. W tym kontekście można przywołać zaproponowaną przez Deleuze’a i Guattariego koncepcję literatury mniejszej rozumianej jako silnie zdeterytorializowana forma ekspresji wydarzająca się w obrębie literatur wielkich i kanonicznych (Deleuze, Guattari 2024). Niektórzy badacze idą dalej, sugerując

¹³ W znalezieniu takich tekstów – często krótkich felietonów – pomaga archiwum Stowarzyszenia Pisarzy Chińskich www.chinawriter.com.cn.

wręcz, że cała literatura chińska (w tym także sinofoniczna) stanowią „literaturę mniejszą” w kulturze światowej (Prado-Fonts 2006). Deterytorializacja dokonywać się może nie tylko w obszarze języka¹⁴ lecz także w kwestii podtrzymywania bądź porzucania relacji z Chinami jako cywilizacyjnym bądź kulturowym punktem odniesienia. Shu-mei Shih, jedna z ważniejszych badaczek studiów sinofonicznych, zauważa, że w obrębie tej kategorii pojawiają się nierzadko głosy najbardziej krytyczne wobec sinocentryczności (Shih 2010). W tym samym tekście proponuje ona odrzucenie przypisywania kategorii chińskości jako porządkującej doświadczenia (i literatury) społeczności będących obszarem zainteresowań studiów sinofonicznych.

W logikę podtrzymywania relacji wpisuje się z kolei wizja Chin kulturowych (*Cultural China*), zaproponowana w 1991 roku przez Tu Wei-minga, który nakreślił trzy kręgi – „symboliczne uniwersa” (Tu 1991, s. 12–13). W obrębie pierwszego znajdują się Chiny, Tajwan, Hongkong oraz Singapur, w obrębie drugiego – diaspory chińskie na całym świecie, trzeci zaś obejmuje wszystkie osoby, które podejmują wysiłek intelektualnego zrozumienia chińskości i przekazywania tegoż zrozumienia na gruncie własnych społeczności. Tu Wei-ming wskazuje na okresy w historii (np. czasy zimnej wojny), gdy właśnie ten trzeci krąg miał największy wpływ na kształtowanie obrazu Chin w świecie. Współcześnie, w kontekście literatury rola taka przypada przykładowo tłumaczom – nierzadko to ich wybory tworzą obraz literatury poza jej macierzystym kręgiem kulturowym. Jest to istotny aspekt, bowiem literatura chińska¹⁵ powoli (choć systematycznie) buduje swoją obecność w świecie. Powoli, gdyż twórczość chińskich autorek i autorów relatywnie rzadko doczeka się uznania kapituł międzynarodowych nagród, których werdykty skokowo napędzają rozpoznawalność. Do 2012 roku, czyli do momentu otrzymania Literackiej Nagrody Nobla przez Mo Yana, tworzyło to w Chinach specyficzne zjawisko *kompleksu noblowskiego*, znakomicie opisanego przez Julię Lovell (2006)¹⁶. W ostatnich latach ta niekorzystna tendencja ulega zmianie, również za

¹⁴ W poczet pisarek i pisarzy sinofonicznych zalicza się czasem autorki piszące po angielsku, jak na przykład przekładaną na język polski Li Yiyun. Należy jednak zaznaczyć, że doczekaliśmy się już bardziej szczegółowych rozróżnień, przykładowo na „anglofoniczną literaturę Amerykanek/Amerikanów pochodzenia chińskiego” czy „sinofoniczną literaturę Amerykanek/Amerikanów pochodzenia chińskiego” (przykładowo: Wong 2005).

¹⁵ W tym miejscu, by nie komplikować nadmiernie argumentu, uznaję literaturę chińską za zbiór, którego literatura sinofoniczna stanowi część.

¹⁶ Praca Lovell sytuuje początki tego zjawiska w latach osiemdziesiątych ubiegłego stulecia. W studium tym Autorka prześledziła także kontrowersje i ambiwalentne reakcje związane z przyznaniem nagrody Gao Xingjianowi w 2000 roku. „Kompleks noblowski” stanowi punkt wyjścia dla kolejnego tekstu, który przygotowałem na łamy *Przeglądu Orientalistycznego*.

sprawą literatury gatunkowej: science-fiction oraz *danmei*, czyli powieści *boys love* z nurtu fantastyki. Mimo to ten „trzeci krąg” osób pracujących nad zrozumieniem i opowiadaniem „Chin kulturowych” stanowi ważny element „uświatowienia” literatury chińskojęzycznej. Docierając do najbliższej nam współczesności, nie sposób pominąć także postaci Yana Lianke, który oprócz tłumaczonej na język polski twórczości, jest autorem esejów i tekstów krytycznoliterackich. W nieprzełożonym jeszcze zbiorze *Faxian xiaoshuo* (发现小说¹⁷) Yan proponuje koncepcję mitorealizmu (*shenshizhuyi* 神现实主义). W prawdopodobnie najkrótszym możliwym ujęciu jest „techniką i ścieżką wykorzystującą symbole, alegorie, mity, legendy, senne pejzaże, magiczne transformacje, które wyrastają z codziennego życia i społecznej rzeczywistości” (cytat i przekład za Kasarełło 2024).

Podsumowując, pojęcie literatury światowej w Chinach, jak pokazuje powyższy historycznoliteracki zarys, pozostawało i pozostaje w ścisłym związku z uwarunkowaniami (geo)politycznymi. Nie oznacza to jednak, że definicja i rozumienie tej kategorii zostały narzucone Chinom z zewnątrz. W ostatnich latach widoczne są zarówno polityczne wzmożenie wyrażone przez włączanie partyjnej nowomowy do słownika teorii literatury, jak i na nowo kształtowana asertywność kulturowa. Nowe wyobrażenia na temat literatury światowej mają proponować porządek mniej osadzony w zachodniej teorii, a przy tym należycie podkreślający bogactwo chińskiego dorobku cywilizacyjnego. Alternatywne, choć niekoniecznie nowe, koncepcje literatury sinofonicznej, wskazują na możliwość oderwania literatury od przypisywanego jej zadania budowania prestiżu określonego ośrodka kulturowo-politycznego; kierunek ten, według mojej intuicji, wydaje się bardziej zgodny ze współczesnym myśleniem o literaturze.

Analiza ta wykracza poza domenę tradycyjnie pojmowanej sinologii, gdyż skupia się na szerszej refleksji nad dynamiką kształtującą globalny przepływ idei i tekstów. Wgląd w chińskie dyskusje pokazuje, że pojęcie „literatury światowej” wciąż pozostaje przedmiotem przekształceń i redefinicji, nierzadko na potrzeby lokalnej kultury. Choć prawdopodobnie większość badaczy zaangażowanych w debatę dąży do tego, by termin ten nie utrwał istniejących hierarchii, to dialog na temat szczegółów i konkretów nieprzerwanie trwa...

¹⁷ Tytuł ten można przełożyć jako „Odkrywanie powieści” bądź „Odkrywanie prozy narracyjnej”, jak w znakomitym studium poświęconym mitorealizmowi proponuje Kasarełło (2024).

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Co po kompleksie noblowskim? Nowe kierunki w literaturze chińskiej w kontekście literatury światowej

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Abstrakt:

Literatura powstająca w ChRL po 2012 roku funkcjonuje w specyficznym środowisku, które w wielu aspektach nie znajduje punktów odniesienia poza Chinami. Ostatnie lata przyniosły jeszcze intensywniejsze upolitycznienie sfery sztuki w oficjalnych przestrzeniach, co przekłada się na określone wymagania formułowane pod adresem pisarek i pisarzy. Równocześnie, samo pojęcie autora, dzieła i rola literatury ulega przemianom związanym przez rozwój rozległego uniwersum pisarstwa internetowego, które przekształca wiele branż kreatywnych: w pierwszej kolejności w Chinach, w dalszej – poza ich granicami.

Niniejszy artykuł prezentuje najnowsze tendencje w literaturze współczesnej powstającej w ChRL po 2012 roku. Opisuje także uwarunkowania społeczno-polityczne, które mają szczególnie wpływ na powstawanie i cyrkulację dzieł literackich. Opisane zjawiska zostają wpisane w szerszy kontekst literatury światowej. Optyka ta pozwala na rozróżnienie tego, co lokalne, globalne i globalne w rozwoju literatury powstałej w ChRL w prezentowanym okresie.

słowa kluczowe: literatura współczesna, literatura chińska, literatura światowa, “kompleks noblowski”

Abstract:

Literature produced in the People’s Republic of China after 2012 operates in a distinctive environment that very often lacks relevant points of reference outside of the country. Recent years have witnessed an even more intense politicisation of art within official spheres, which has translated into specific expectations imposed on writers. At the same time, the very notions of the author and the work, as well as the role of literature, are transforming in connection with the development of an extensive universe of online writing, which is reshaping numerous creative industries, first in China and subsequently beyond its borders.

This article presents the most recent trends in contemporary literature produced in the People’s Republic of China. It also examines the socio-political conditions that exert a particular influence on the production and circulation of literary works. The phenomena discussed are situated within a broader context of world literature. This perspective enables the distinction

between local, glocal, and global dimensions in the development of literature produced in the People's Republic of China during the period under consideration.

Keywords: contemporary literature, Chinese literature, World Literature Studies, “Nobel complex”

W pracy z 2006 roku Julia Lovell oferuje studium osobliwego zjawiska w historii współczesnej literatury. Brytyjska badaczka śledzi historię „kompleksu noblowskiego” odczuwanego przez establishment literacki w Chińskiej Republice Ludowej. Jak sama nazwa sugeruje, jednym z elementów zjawiska było poczucie braku uznania dla współczesnej literatury chińskiej. Jak dowiadujemy się z książki Lovell, nagroda przyznana w 2000 roku Gao Xingjianowi 高行健 z wielu powodów nie była w stanie wyciszyć „noblowskich niepokojów”. Poczucie spełnienia przyniósł za to triumf Mo Yana 莫言 w 2012 roku. Werdykt – jak wiele wcześniejszych i zapewne wiele późniejszych – wzbudził kontrowersje, lecz w Chinach nagroda była celebrowana jako sukces zbiorowy, świadczący o sile kultury, która autora zrodziła.

Przypomnijmy: Gao jest dramaturgiem chińskiego pochodzenia, który w 1986 roku przeniósł się do Francji i tam zrzekł się chińskiego obywatelstwa; obywatelstwo francuskie uzyskał w 1997 roku. Akademia Szwedzka w uzasadnieniu dla przyznania nagrody w 2000 roku wskazała na uniwersalne wartości twórczości Gao, przywołując jednak w tym samym czasie dwa dzieła, w których dostrzegalne są aluzje pod adresem chińskiego reżimu – *Górę Duszy* oraz *Biblię jednego człowieka*. Mo Yan z kolei jest pisarzem zdomowionym w tamtejszym mainstreamie od połowy lat osiemdziesiątych. Sprzeciw wobec wyróżnienia dla Mo Yana, wyrażany m.in. przez Salmana Rushdiego (Flood 2012), wynikał z wypowiedzi chińskiego pisarza popierających ograniczenie swobodę wypowiedzi, roli pełnionej w literackim establishmentie oraz symbolicznych aktów wsparcia dla rządzącej Komunistycznej Partii Chin. Głosy niezadowolenia, jakie rozbrzmiały na Zachodzie, nie zmąciły radosnych nastrojów w kraju, jak również nie zmieniły w żaden sposób faktu, że rok 2012 stanowi istotną cezurę w historii współczesnej literatury chińskiej.

Ten „ponoblowski” moment stanowi punkt wyjścia dla problemu zasygnalizowanego w tytule. Niedługo przed ukończeniem pracy nad tym tekstem drukiem ukazało się wydanie *Literatury na Świecie* w większości poświęcone właśnie literaturze chińskiej. W eseju Joanny Krenz, który sama Autorka nazywa “półprzewodnikiem”, kompleks noblowski

również stanowi istotny punkt odniesienia, a przypadki obu noblistów doczekały się szerszego omówienia niż to zaprezentowane powyżej. Szczęśliwie dla mnie, nasze teksty, mimo podobnej tematyki, różnią się podejściem i twórcami, których postanowiliśmy wyeksponować. Niniejszy artykuł w większym stopniu zwraca uwagę na “nadbudowę” systemu literackiego w Chinach, dlatego można uznać go za uzupełnienie – czy też rozszerzenie – znakomitej prezentacji, która ukazała się na łamach *Literatury na Świecie*.

Studium to stawia sobie za cel prezentację głównych zjawisk dostrzegalnych przy badaniu literatury powstającej w ChRL w ostatnich kilkunastu latach. Oprócz opisanie tematów twórczości, gatunków i najważniejszych nazwisk, zarysowuje także krajobraz dynamicznych przemian technologicznych, a także nowych oczekiwań stawianych wobec twórczości literackiej przez aparat państwowy.

W tekście tym pojawia się rozróżnienie między “literaturą chińską” a “literaturą powstałą w ChRL” i większa uwaga zostaje poświęcona tej drugiej. Naturalnie, pojawiająca się w tytule “literatura chińska” stanowi kategorię szerszą. Rozwój studiów nad literaturą chińskojęzyczną sprawił, że – wydawałoby się – podstawowa kategoria „chińskości” zaczęła domagać się doprecyzowania, a w niektórych przypadkach wręcz redefinicji. Bowiem literatura sinofoniczna (Shih 2011) nie może być bez poczynionych zawczasu odpowiednich zastrzeżeń zrównana z literaturą chińską; niektórzy tę samą sinofoniczność chcą sprowadzić do „chińskiej literatury światowej”, której podzbiorem byłaby „literatura światowa po chińsku” (Liu 2018). Rozróżnienia te próbuje się godzić przez stosowanie obszerniejszego pojęcia literatury chińsko-sinofonicznej (Zhang 2022). Dyskusje te nie są jedynie pokazami terminologicznej kreatywności. Tworzą one język, w którym dokonuje się proces renegotiacji paradygmatu, oznaczający przede wszystkim przejście od „chińskości” rozumianej przede wszystkim jako kontekst narodowy ku ponadnarodowej praktyce, zarówno w obszarze literatury, jak i badań nad nią. Choć dyskursy te pokazują najnowsze oblicze dyscypliny, to różnice w recepcji dwóch wymienionych powyżej noblistów pokazują, że problem „tożsamości literatury” i przynależności narodowej osoby autorskiej istniał długo przed rozpoczęciem dyskusji na temat pojęcia sinofoniczności.

W przypadku Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej przesunięciu uległo także rozumienie literatury w kontekście studiów nad literaturą światową. Przed noblowskim wyróżnieniem dla Mo Yana, skupiano się przede wszystkim na eksponowaniu tak zwanej „czystej literatury” (纯文学 *chun wenxue*, *pure literature*). Jest to obszerne pojęcie (przykładowo, całą książkę

„czystej literaturze” poświęca: Xu 2024) odnoszące się nie tyle do konkretnej grupy bądź rodzaju pisania, lecz do praktyki wyzwalania literatury od dydaktyzmu i zideologizowanej ingerencji ze strony Komunistycznej Partii Chin. Termin służył także uwzniośleniu twórczości literackiej w czasach nasilonej komodyfikacji dóbr kultury w latach dziewięćdziesiątych XX wieku. „Czysta literatura” stanowiła synonim wolności i innowacyjności, zatem nie formułowano oczekiwań dotyczących stylu, formy, tropów, inspiracji gatunkowych itd. W ostatnich latach z kolei coraz większą uwagę w dyskusji o “światowości” chińskiej literatury poświęca się literaturze gatunkowej, przede wszystkim science-fiction oraz fantastyce. Ich popularność pokazuje jasno, że nie są to marginalne nisze, wręcz przeciwnie – coraz częściej mówi się o nich jako o samodzielnych bytach w obrębie kultury globalnej.

W Chinach obowiązuje dość rygorystyczne rozgraniczenie tych dwóch gatunków (Wang 2019), spotykają się one także z różnym traktowaniem ze strony establishmentu i organów państwowych. Inaczej są promowane poza granicami Chin, trudno też o punkty wspólne w praktykach twórczych oraz czytelniczych. Jednak w pewnym stopniu stanowią one dwie różne strony podejścia państwa do zarządzania produkcją i aktywnością kulturalną. Według McDougall (2014) w aspekcie tym podstawowe założenia są takie same jak w przypadku innych dóbr: państwo bierze odpowiedzialność za kontrolę produkcji, lecz nigdy nie jest w stanie osiągnąć porównywalnej kontroli w zakresie konsumpcji.

Nowa fala chińskiego science-fiction ma swoje początki w latach dziewięćdziesiątych ubiegłego wieku – dokładnie tym samym czasie, gdy w Chinach prowadzono intensywne dyskusje nad komercjalizacją kultury. Należy zaznaczyć, że literatura science-fiction rzeczonyj komercjalizacji się nie poddała, czy też: nie otrzymała na to nawet szansy ze względu na kojarzenie tego gatunku z literaturą młodzieżową mającą służyć popularyzacji nauki. Peryferyjny status w połączeniu z eksperymentami wykraczającymi poza konwencje literatury popularnej sprawiły, że chińskie sci-fi doczekało się miana “nowej fali” (Song 2023), które pozostaje w użyciu również obecnie, gdy czołowi przedstawiciele gatunku stali się poczytni i powszechnie znani. Jednak w ostatniej dekadzie doszło do sprzężenia zwrotnego: pierwsze oznaki uznania międzynarodowego zarówno popchnęły literaturę ku mainstreamowi i instytucjonalnemu wsparciu (Chau 2018), jak również uczyniły ją obiektem dyskusji w obszarze studiów nad literaturą światową (Song 2021). Poważniejsze zainteresowanie chińskim sci-fi w tym kontekście (przykładowo: Song 2022; Healey 2023; Teodorescu 2025, Wu 2020, Song and Wang 2022) może stanowić punkt wyjścia dla dwóch opowieści o dyscyplinie.

Pierwsza ukazywałaby rosnące otwarcie na studia kulturowe (*cultural studies*), popularne gatunki i rozproszoną cyrkulację dzieł, która wydarza się w organiczny sposób bez ingerencji oficjalnych instytucji. Tym samym można mówić o stopniowym przechodzeniu od literatury światowej (elitarniej) do literatury globalnej (egalitarnej).

Druga narracja prezentowałaby bardziej gorzki wydźwięk. Jak wspomina Song Mingwei (2019), w Chinach “dyscyplina została odmieniona” w 2010 roku na konferencji naukowej¹, lecz przełom nastąpił w roku 2015, gdy Liu Cixin 劉慈欣 został pierwszym azjatyckim autorem wyróżnionym nagrodą Hugo, a rok później to samo wyróżnienie w innej kategorii trafiło do autorki Hao Jingfang 郝景芳. To wtedy świat (również, w dużym stopniu, akademicki) zwrócił uwagę na literaturę tworzoną od trzech dekad i od kilku lat cieszącą się zainteresowaniem w Chinach. Trajektorja ta przypomina nam o nieustannym wpływie instytucji konsekrujących i elitarnych kryteriach uznania, które każą nam zadać pytanie o efekty dwudziestu lat debat na temat utopijnego projektu literatury światowej, literatury światowej jako “sposobu czytania” czy rewizjach antologii literatury światowej.

Taką moc “konsekrowania”, kanonizowania i uświatowiania mogą mieć także odpowiednio wpływowe jednostki. He (2025) z użyciem obszernych danych na temat literatury chińskiej w przekładzie angielskim dokonał analizy różnych trybów cyrkulacji tej literatury w krajach anglojęzycznych. Liczne dane ilościowe nie były w stanie przesłonić roli “ludzi dobrej woli”, w tym wypadku Howarda Goldblatta i Kena Liu. Pierwszy konsekwentnie przedstawiał Mo Yana anglojęzycznym czytelnikom i w ocenie samego pisarza przyczynił się do noblowskiego wyróżnienia w 2012 roku (He 2025, 114). Drugi w ocenie He jest “niemal samodzielnie odpowiedzialny” za ostatni wzrost popularności chińskiego science fiction (2025, 109). Praca tych dwóch tłumaczy podkreśla rolę “ambasadorów” danej literatury i, w pewnej mierze, okoliczności niemożliwych do przewidzenia ani wykreowania, gdyż sukcesy tej miary nie są wynikiem ani naukowych koncepcji bardziej zdemokratyzowanej literatury światowej ani zaplanowanych dążeń instytucji kulturalnych.

Wspomniane wyżej sprzężenie zwrotne, które wskazuje na entuzjazm organizacji partyjno-państwowych w promowaniu literatury science-fiction, nie miało miejsca

¹ Wcześniej, jak wspomina twórca sci-fi i profesor Fei Dao w eseju o znaczącym tytule *Sci-fi już nie zawstydzia* (Sci-Fi: Embarassing No More, Fei 2019), fantastyka naukowa pozostawała w praktyce gatunkiem zarówno nieznanym, jak i ignorowanym bądź świadomie pomijanym przez establishment literacki.

w przypadku szeroko definiowanej fantastyki. W 2014 roku w dwóch przemówieniach Przewodniczący ChRL uderzył w „ilość ponad jakość, [...] schlebianie wulgarnym gustom, pogoń za zyskami, działanie na zmysły przypominające *ecstasy*”² i przestrzegał artystów przed „zagubieniem się w nurtach gospodarki rynkowej” (Xi 2014). W pierwszym z dwóch przemówień, które zostały uznane za nowe wytyczne dla całego sektora kultury w ChRL, Xi Jinping wchodzi także w dość szczegółowe kwestie. Zwraca uwagę na znaczenie pewnych parametrów, np. wskaźnika klikalności (*Click Through Rate*, w oryginale 点击率), dodając, że nie powinny one być jednakże uznawane za priorytet. Każda z przytoczonych wyżej uwag uderza w niewymienione z nazwy, rozległe uniwersum literatury internetowej w Chinach. Literatura ta jest zjawiskiem multimedialnym, a przy tym podatnym na działania rynkowe, które swoim tempem i zakresem dalece wykraczają standardy znane w branżach w innych miejscach na świecie. Sama specyfika tego ekosystemu nie jest kluczowa dla podejmowanych tu kwestii, lecz zarysuję ją pokrótce. Nawet pobieżne przedstawienie pozwala dostrzec różnice pomiędzy tym, jak dzieła literatury internetowej funkcjonują w rodzimym kręgu kulturowym, a tym, w jaki sposób zataczają coraz szersze kręgi globalnie.

Po pierwsze, choć cała aktywność twórcza wydarza się w obrębie ściśle kontrolowanych platform internetowych, to ma charakter oddolny. Deelityzacja działalności literackiej w ChRL w głównej mierze wiąże się mniejszą rolą profesjonalnych pisarzy i samego pisarstwa jako zawodu (Tao 2016). Platformy internetowe zrzeszające czytelników i twórców stanowią najbardziej wyrazisty przykład zarówno wspomnianej deelityzacji, jak i potencjalnej demokratyzacji, gdyż poczytnym twórcą może w zasadzie pozostać każdy. Z drugiej strony literatura internetowa w Chinach to także skrajny przejaw rynkowej rywalizacji w obszarze kultury. Architektura serwisów promuje osoby piszące najwięcej i publikujące najczęściej, co upodabnia twórczość do fabrycznej produkcji seryjnej. Ta nadbudowa determinuje formę powieści, które charakteryzuje schematyzm i niezwykle duża długość, nierzadko liczona w setkach rozdziałów³. O ile objętość dzieł przestaje być ograniczeniem dla zagranicznych wydawców (*vide* przypis 3), to pozostałe cechy charakterystyczne tego uniwersum są przekładalne

² W tym kontekście za humorystyczną można uznać historię Kevina Cazada z 2017, którą państwowe media w Chinach ochoczo podchwyciły. Młody Kalifornijczyk wyznał w sieci, że lektura angielskich przekładów chińskiej fantastyki uwolniła go od nałogu kokainowego (Walsh 2019).

³ Przykładowo: w Polsce Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca nabyło prawa do całości serii autorki Mo Xiang Tong Xiu 墨香铜臭 *Błogosławieństwo Niebios* (天官赐福 *Tian Guan Ci Fu*). Seria liczy ponad 900 tysięcy znaków, co w planach wydawcy przełoży się na 9 tomów o łącznej długości około 3000 stron.

w mniejszym stopniu. Użytkowników chińskich serwisów – do największych należy przykładowo portal Qidian 起点 – można określić mianem prosumentów. W języku polskim słowo kojarzone jest przede wszystkim ze źródłami energii odnawialnej, lecz istotniejszą rolę w rozumieniu terminu w tym przypadku pełni etymologiczne *portmanteau*, czyli połączenie “producenta” i “konsumenta”. Czytelnicy mają możliwość komentowania poszczególnych fragmentów opublikowanych rozdziałów i wyrażania opinii w czasie zbliżonym do rzeczywistego, dzięki czemu zostają oni włączeni w proces nadawania kierunku fabuły. Przekład specyfikę tę całkowicie zatracą. O ile w internetowych fanowskich przekładach zamieszczanych w sieci (np. na stronie webnovel.com) czytelnicy mogą zostawić komentarz, to nie ma on już szans wpłynąć na kształt tekstu. Literaturę internetową cechuje także silna kompartmentalizacja – platformy porządkują teksty według bardzo dokładnych kategorii, w obrębie których dalej wyróżnia się gatunki. Możliwość wyboru między “romansem z CEO” 总裁豪门 (*zongcai haomen*) a historią “pięknego białego kołnierzyka” 职场丽人 (*lichang liren*, młodej kobiety spełniającej się w pracy biurowej) pokazują nie tylko szerokie spektrum gustów osób piszących i czytających, nie tylko potwierdzają “prosumencki” charakter literatury, lecz wskazują też na techno-kapitalistyczne mechanizmy personalizacji dóbr. Szeroka, skategoryzowana i przewidywalna oferta pozwala na znalezienie przed lekturą dokładnie takiego tekstu, jakiego czytelnik oczekuje.

Science-fiction jak i rozmaite odmiany fantastyki publikowanej online łączy włączenie dzieł w tryby maszyny nowych przemysłów kreatywnych, które traktują tekst jako IP (*intellectual property*) stanowiącą punkt wyjścia dla multimedialnych adaptacji. Science-fiction jest traktowane jako przemysł obejmujący publikacje, gry i filmy (Global Times), podobnie literatura internetowa, między innymi ze względu na “niski koszt tworzenia” (Xiao et al.) może liczyć na liczne adaptacje w formie komiksów, animacji, gier, seriali czy filmów pełnometrażowych. W bardziej krytyczno-literackim ujęciu, jakie zaproponował He Ping (2018), chińska literatura internetowa nie powinna być postrzegana przez perspektywę stawiającą w centrum tekst. “Tekst-centriczna” analiza powinna ustąpić miejsca skupieniu na “pochodnych”, jakie powstają na podglebiu danej historii⁴. Te nowe formy życia nie wiążą się ściśle z zagadnieniem literatury światowej, lecz nie są one wszakże kontekstem wyłącznie

⁴ W tym samym artykule He słusznie przypomina, że nie zawsze tak było – na początku XXI wieku w chińskiej sieci pojawili się ambitni, młodzi autorzy, których eseistyka, opowiadania i powieści wciąż najlepiej funkcjonowały jako samodzielne teksty i doczekały się sporych sukcesów w druku.

lokalnym – kultury fanowskie (*fandomy*) śledzą adaptacyjne reinkarnacje dzieła, co potencjalnie zwiększa zasięg jego cyrkulacji.

Adaptacje otwierają jednak ścieżkę innej dynamice, w której literatura jako medium przestaje odgrywać aż tak istotną rolę. W okresie opisywanym przez Lovell – od początku lat osiemdziesiątych XX wieku do początku tego stulecia – od literatury w znacznie większym stopniu oczekiwano zdolności do budowania kulturowego prestiżu kraju, co przyniosło bardzo ograniczone rezultaty (2006). Dziś “dobrą historię Chin” opowiadać może gra komputerowa (*Black Myth: Wukong*) czy influencerka romantyzująca tradycyjne życie na wsi (Li Ziqi). Jak odnotowały państwowe media, Li Ziqi potrafi robić to wręcz bez słów (Li 2020, 275). Rozwój technologiczny, jaki dokonał się w ostatnich dwóch dekad przesunął literaturę od “jednego z głównych” narzędzi budowania *soft power* do “jednego z wielu”.

Zmienił się także narzucany odgórnie paradygmat promowania chińskiej kultury za granicą. Trzem dekadom reform i otwarcia przyświecało hasło “zmierzania do świata” (走向世界 *zouxiang shijie*)⁵, od połowy 2013 roku ton nadaje “opowiadanie dobrej historii Chin” (讲好中国故事 *jiang hao Zhongguo gushi*), co znajduje swoje odzwierciedlenie również w dyskusjach na temat literatury światowej (Zhang 2014, Chen 2016, Fang 2016, Huang 2022).

Choć fraza “dobra historia Chin” może implikować homogenizację literatury, to coraz większą popularnością i uznaniem cieszą narracje regionalne. Potwierdza to jedynie ograniczone możliwości państwa do “dekretowania”, czym literatura ma być i jak powinna powstawać. Za najgłośniejszą nieformalną i lokalną grupą pisarzy, których można przypisać do jednego czasu i miejsca, należy uznać tzw. nowych pisarzy z regionu Północno-Wschodniego Chin, czyli Dongbei (新东北作家群 *Xin Dongbei Zuoqia Qun*). W poczet tego grona zalicza się twórców urodzonych przeważnie po 1980 roku w jednej z trzech prowincji północnowschodnich Chin: Heilongjiangu, Liaoning oraz Jilin. Prace krytycznoliterackie na temat “dongbejczyków” skupiają się na pisarstwie najbardziej znanego i przekładanego na języki zachodnie Shuang Xuetao 双雪涛, a także Ban Yu 班余, Zheng Zhi 郑执, czy autorki Yang Zhihan 杨知寒. Jednym z głównych wątków przewijających się w twórczości

⁵ Nie oznacza to całkowitego zarzucenia hasła “going global”. Przytoczony powyżej w innym kontekście He Xiangzhen opublikował swoją analizę cyrkulacji literatury chińskiej w krajach anglojęzycznych w tomie poświęconym więzom chińsko-afrykańskim w mediach i kulturze. Wybór ten wskazuje na przydatność chińskiego paradygmatu, którym mógłby wesprzeć cyrkulację literatur krajów Globalnego Południa (He 2025, 99-100).

powyższych jest doświadczenie pokoleń, które ucierpiało na masowych zwolnieniach i dezindustrializacji regionu, jaka dokonała się w ostatniej dekadzie XX wieku. Chiński “pas rdzy” stanowi inspirację dla twórczości literackiej, a także filmowej i telewizyjnej. Zjawisko doczekało się własnej, na wpół- humorystycznej nazwy “renesansu Dongbei” (东北文艺复兴 *Dongbei Wenyi Fuxing*). Literackie oblicze tej fali, mimo różnic w indywidualnych stylach autorów, kojarzone jest głównie z pisarstwem dekonstruującym pamięć o trudnym przełomie lat dziewięćdziesiątych i dwutysięcznych, które w obliczu współczesnych trudności ekonomicznych nabiera nowego znaczenia poza lokalnym kontekstem.

Śmielsze wyodrębnianie różnic regionalnych dokonuje się także w samym języku literackim. Oczywiście, stosowanie dialektów (方言 *fangyan*) nie stanowi *novum* w literaturze chińskiej, lecz, jak zauważa Xiang (2023), we wcześniejszych okresach wplatanie go silniej wskazywało na klasę społeczną narracji i postaci (jako odbiegających od standardowego języka chińskiego, tzw. mowy powszechnej 普通话 *putonghua*), gdy tymczasem w twórczości literackiej ostatnich kilkunastu lat dialekty otwierają drogę do głębszej eksploracji świata emocjonalnego i psychologicznego protagonistów. W ramach tego trendu wymienić można kilka utworów, które zostały zauważone w Chinach, również przez krytyków i establishment literacki: silnie naznaczona językiem kantońskim i nagrodzona w 2022 roku Blancpain Imaginist Award *Mapa przyptywów* (潮汐图 *Chaoxi tu*) autorstwa Lin Zhao 林棹, *Pawi bodhisattwa* (孔雀菩提 *Kongque Puti*) Jiao Dian 焦典 z elementami dialektu yunnańskiego, czy wyróżniona nagrodą Mao Duna w 2019 powieść *Główna rola* (主角 *Zhu jue*) autorstwa Chen Yan 陈彦, wplatająca w narrację dialekt Shaanxi.

Wspomniana wyżej w kontekście literatury internetowej deelitizacja literatury dotyczy także tradycyjnej literatury⁶, w tym poezji⁷. Z kolei pisarstwo twórców-amatorów 素人写作

⁶ Podział na “literaturę tradycyjną” 传统文学 i literaturę internetową 网络文学 jest najczęściej stosowanym rozróżnieniem w chińskim dyskursie. Osoby autorskie tworzące w obrębie tej pierwszej oczywiście także wykorzystują internet (np. czasopisma literackie) do prezentowania swojej twórczości, lecz nie są częścią infrastruktury portali i platform, w obrębie których rozrasta się literatura internetowa.

⁷ Poezja określana terminem *dagong shige* 打工诗歌, w ostatnich latach stała się przedmiotem licznych opracowań akademickich. Za Krenz (2023) przytaczam link do szerokiej bazy tekstów akademickich poświęconych “literaturze niższych warstw” 底层文学 *diceng wenxue*: <https://u.osu.edu/mclc/bibliographies/lit/theme-1/#MWS>. Wspomnienie poezji wydaje mi się istotne ze względu na to, że to właśnie w twórczości kurierów, pracowników fabryk i budowlańców ujawnia się problematyka prekaryzacji, która umiejscawia literaturę tę w aktualnych kategoriach globalnych.

suren xiezuo, często silnie naznaczone autobiografizmem w ostatnich latach nierzadko zataczało szerokie kręgi wśród czytelników i krytyków zainteresowanych społecznie zaangażowanymi narracjami. Za przykład posłużyć mogą dwie autorki: Fan Yusu 范雨素 oraz Yang Benfen 杨本芬. Pierwsza w 2017 roku z dnia na dzień zwróciła powszechną uwagę autobiograficznym esejem *Jestem Fan Yusu* 我是范雨素 *Wo shi Fan Yusu*. Sukces ten pokazał dwie cechy chińskiego systemu literackiego: inkluzywność pisarstwa publikowanego w sieci, a także rozmyte granice między fikcją (czy też, w tym wypadku, autofikcją), a non-fiction, między opowiadaniem a esejem. Yang Benfen zaczęła pisać po sześćdziesiątym roku życia, a bezpośrednim impulsem dla pierwszej powieści, nagradzanego *Jesiennego ogrodu* 秋园 *Qiu yuan*, była śmierć jej matki. Popularność nieprofesjonalnych autorek i autorów może po części wynikać również ze sceptycyzmu wobec twórców skupionych wokół sponsorowanych przez instytucje państwowe czasopism literackich. W zeszłym roku świat chińskiej prozy poruszył skandal plagiatowski: konto na platformie Xiaohongshu⁸ zestawilo fragmenty chińskich powieści z mniej znanymi starszymi dziełami i tekstami zagranicznymi, ujawniając, jak eufemistycznie ujęto, “nadmierne zapożyczenia” (Sanlian Shenghuo Zhoukan 2025).

Mimo czujnego przewodnictwa aparatu państwowego, literatura w Chinach w wielu przestrzeniach rozwija się organicznie bądź rządzona skrajnie rynkową rywalizacją. Zmieniająca (i zmniejszająca) się rola literatury ma charakter globalny, lecz w ChRL napędzana jest nieporównywalną skalą pisarstwa internetowego. Nie równa się to jednak odchodzeniu w niebyt. Grono twórców badanych i czytanych przez pryzmat literatury światowej jest bardziej różnorodne, czasem wspierane polityką państwa, częściej jednak wobec niej obojętne. Opowiada różną – nie tylko “dobrą” – historię Chin. To prawdopodobnie najogólniejszy kierunek ku stawianiu się literaturą światową.

Zaprezentowany przegląd siłą rzeczy nie może być kompletny. Przytoczeni tu twórcy w większości zaliczani są do najważniejszych na podstawie określonych parametrów i ta arbitralność skazuje na pominięcie setek innych, o których być może jeszcze usłyszymy. Podobnie ma się sprawa z trendami literackimi – choć omówienie wyczerpująco mapuje ważne

⁸ W uproszczeniu najpodobniejszą do “Małej Czerwonej Książeczki” zachodnią aplikacją jest Instagram.

zjawiska ostatnich kilkunastu lat, to z pewnością prezentuje jedynie największe wyspy stale rozszerzającego się świata.

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Two sides of the mirror: Contesting social orders with Chinese art heterotopias

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of an investigation into the socio-political and cultural landscape of Mainland China in the Xi Jinping era using discourse analysis and close reading of selected works of Chinese visual arts, film, literature and theatre. The authors read these works through the lenses of Michel Foucault's heterotopia. The in-depth analysis of over seventy works has generated four overlapping dimensions - heterotopias of transition, compensation and illusion, ambiguity, and heterotopia of dispersed agency. Each of the four types is substantiated in the paper through the case study of one artistic work: an exhibition by Wang Guangyi, a film by Li Ruijun, a short story by Chen Qiufan and a play by He Qi. The authors aim to prove the validity of research of literary works and cultural productions for the understanding of complex social phenomena, as expressed by artists and communicated to audiences.

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Introduction

Today's China – that of the Xi Jinping era (from 2012) – is a country of both continuity, and rapid change. The creative activity of artists and writers in the particular historical time which is the focus of this paper, is shaped by socio-political factors which are not new, but which appear with new intensity. On the one hand, the party-state expects artists to fulfil a certain public mission. In Xi Jinping's 习近平 own words, they should “tell people what should be affirmed and praised, and what needs to be opposed and condemned”, as well as “wave high the banner of core socialist values” (Xi, 2014). This ideological treatment of culture as a domain, Leninist in essence, can be traced back to the famous Mao Zedong's 1942 Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art speech. On the other hand, however, artists function in a thriving sector of the economy (the cultural and creative sectors), with potentially huge financial gains (especially in film and visual arts), and high expectations of audiences. This is the heritage of the Reform and Opening-Up era (from 1979) when the Chinese Communist Party decided to gradually let the forces of free market economy reconfigure the cultural sector, among many other areas of economic and public life. All the while, artists and writers must operate within ever-changing boundaries of an intricate system of state control, with an ever-growing power of the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP. Crossing the fluctuating red line of what is permitted might have devastating consequences for the artists' career, financial situation, and possibly also their personal freedom. And so, almost all artistic activity in China places itself somewhere between the officially sanctioned (and lavishly supported) ideological discourse, and more independent creation which nevertheless does not go beyond the guiderails of what is allowed.

While ideological discourse of the Xi Jinping era is easy to access and already well-researched (see esp. Rudd, 2024; Tsang & Cheung, 2024; Bachulska et al., 2024), this is not the case with artistic

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productions and literary works of the last decade or so, whose authors decide to explore contemporary social topics from viewpoints outside the boundaries of the official propaganda (see i.e. Wang, 2019 for one such study). In today's China, with all the variety and the sheer scale of artistic and literary production, identification of leading themes, frameworks and approaches to describing social reality by artists and writers is a challenge in its own right.

The research of the topic presented in this paper bases on a thorough investigation of over seventy works and projects in visual arts, film, literature, and theatre from 2012 until today, with the aim of giving some insight on how social issues are treated and presented in most recent artworks and literary works from Mainland China. Our research results give a heterogeneous picture of ways in which these topics are treated and communicated to domestic audiences. One possible key to deciphering this heterogeneity is offered by Michel Foucault and his concept of heterotopia. Several other researchers of Chinese culture have already used Foucault's concept to analyse China's contemporary cultural productions and literary works. Larson (2020), and Berry (2020) for example, discuss the heterotopian quality of works of the visual artist Cao Fei. Cecilia Mallo in her study (Mallo 2019) on the most important film director of the Sixth Generation, Jia Zhangke analyses his two essential works *The World* and *Cry Me a River* from the point of view of Foucault's (1986) elaboration of gardens as typical heterotopias (especially in some cultures) representing themselves and the whole, sometimes even transcendental world (p. 25). Song (2022) centres his analysis of few prominent works of Chinese science fiction around the notions of utopia, dystopia, chronotopia, and heterotopia. Similar attempts, focused solely on heterotopia are made by Lyu (2021) and Aloisio (2023). Another example includes Rojas (2023), who views the distorted realities of often nightmarish works of fiction of Yan Lianke as heterotopias. Chirita (2022) underlines heterotopian practices employed by Tian Gebing and Paper Tiger Theater Studio collective when analysing a production from 2017, 2017, *500 Meters: Kafka, the Great Wall, or Images from the Unreal World and Daily Heroism*. The authors of this paper, similarly to these researchers, recognise that Foucault's heterotopia can be effectively employed as an investigative tool helping to understand the multi-faceted worlds created by artists and writers whose works have successfully gone through the *shenpi* process¹, and have found their way to domestic Chinese audiences.

The results presented in the paper prove, as the authors hope, the validity of research of literary works and cultural productions for the understanding of complex social phenomena, as expressed by artists and communicated to audiences (see Table 1 which graphically maps the results of the research

Table 1. Summary of the dimensions of heterotopia in the works discussed in the paper and the social issues addressed in these works.

Type of heterotopia	Transition	Compensation / illusion	Ambiguity	Dispersed agency
Artistic work chosen for analysis	solo art exhibition [<i>Face Recognition</i>] <i>Find Descendants of Tartars</i> (<i>Renlian shibie - xunzhao Dada ren houyi</i> 人脸识别 - 寻找鞑靼人后裔) by Wang Guangyi 王广义 (2021)	the film <i>Walking Past the Future</i> (<i>Luguo weilai</i> 路过未来) by Li Ruijun 李睿珺 (2017)	a short story <i>State of Trance</i> (<i>Chushen zhuangtai</i> 出神状态) by Chen Qiufan 陈楸帆 (2018)	theatre production <i>Echoing: The Seagull</i> (<i>Xian shengxiang: Haibu</i> , 夏日声响: 海鸥) directed by He Qi 何齐 (2023)
Traits of the work	exhibition viewers see themselves and their ethnicity in the mirror created by surveillance system and computer analysis	a personal story of a city migrant showing four realms of compensation/illusion: idealised Gansu Province countryside home, dream flat, chip factory, hospital where illegal drug testing is being conducted	a puzzling story of a pre-Armageddon, ultra-megacity where past and future, human and post-human, sense and nonsense coexist without resolution	an adaptation of Anton Chekhov's <i>The Seagull</i> - a multi-perspective jigsaw combining original protagonists and authentic biographies of He Qi and some of the actors
Social issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ethnicity as a construct; ethnic identity of an individual centrality of Han Chinese national identity surveillance and face-recognition technology privacy of citizens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> big city migrants' economic struggles exploitation of ordinary people by big business young people's aspirations and dreams of happy lives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> confusion brought about by modernity increasingly alien reality of modern mega-cities uncertain future of the humanity ephemeral nature of human knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploitation of young workforce by companies social apathy of young people; voluntary loss of agency lack of human-to-human interaction in social media-dominated reality

presented in this paper). The authors explore the ambivalence and ambiguity of artistic expressions that can be labelled as 'heterotopian' and consider them a source of information about China's social reality (for the debate on the correlation between fiction and social reality see Longo, 2016). The primary framing of this article, which assesses periodization into the pre-XI and XI eras, provocatively aligns with overused and clichéd patterns in social and political studies that aim to establish a defining point of departure when characterizing Chinese society. The authors, however, situate this framework within the actual context of artistic creation. This social reality is by no means representative only of the XI Jinping era, nor are the ways cultural creators communicate with their audiences unique to the post-2012 period. Rather than attempting to show if and how the XI Jinping era is different from previous periods from the point of view of artistic creation, the authors use this timeframe merely to narrow-down the research material to a manageable scale, prioritising phenomena and works which can represent the China of today.

What is considered axiomatic from the perspective of researchers positioned outside China, i.e. censorship and control, serves us merely as one of many contexts for exploring the social topics presented in the works of art and the ways these topics are expressed. Although the authors do not dismiss the inherently political or subversive artistic statements in China and, as this introduction suggests, they are fully aware of the features of the general environment in which the artists wishing to reach domestic audiences function, the authors are not primarily concerned with political issues. As tempting as such an exploration might be, it is outside the scope of this article.

Heterotopia, as described in this paper, becomes a strategic tool for unravelling and challenging Chinese realities—it serves as a decoder of social orders and, in parallel, a countermeasure to the sometimes uncertain, sometimes frightening, and sometimes painful experiences of individuals living in these realities. The authors consider works of literature, theatre, film, and visual arts, as heterotopias full of potential, capable of activating "the claims to the attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges" (Foucault and Gordon, 1980: 83). Thus, the proposed framework is twofold in its essence: it not only helps in grasping a work theoretically but also deciphers a practical strategy for shaping dynamic, self-reflexive, and networked spaces of epistemological experimentation. Along with the social change, new conceptualization of heterotopian spaces arise, moving away from "classically Foucauldian" heterotopian sites such as prisons or cemeteries. The research points out to the role of various art-related phenomena that both disrupt and preserve continuity. It stresses the capacity of Chinese artworks that trigger for actuation that might detach Chinese society from its shaping orders by rendering them visible.

Methodology

For this research, the authors have conducted a broad review of literary publications and artistic productions in the Chinese cultural field between 2012 and 2023 using topic analysis. Works were selected through previews, synopsis readings, recommendations, and mentions in secondary literature, using a 5-fold topic grid (Jacoby et al., 2025): Party – Society relations (1), Conceptions of an ideal society (2), Aspirations of youth (3), Social movements (4), and Social issues (5). The grid was borrowed from a questionnaire grid used in sociological research of Chinese youth conducted simultaneously by two groups of researchers from Sciences Po in France and Universidad Autónoma de Madrid in Spain under the same research project (see the datasets: Rocca & Salgues, 2024; Santander Oliván, 2024). In the second stage of the research involving several field trips to China, over seventy works thus selected were put through in-depth analysis, combining discourse analysis with textual analysis (see Fairclough, 2010).

Due to censorship and systemic constraints, films were mostly watched in China through Chinese streaming platforms (blocked outside the country), visual arts exhibitions were visited by researchers in person or interviews with their authors and curators were conducted, theatre performances were watched during major theatre festivals or using technical recordings of performances. The field trips were conducted in 2023. Several adjustments to the original research plan had to be made due to difficulties in accessing cultural productions for view: more time had to be allowed for viewing of recordings during field trips, at the cost of reducing researchers' time for other fieldwork activity; more weight than originally envisaged was placed on expert (Chinese festival programmers, critics and academics)

recommendations and assistance in getting access to productions to view, rather than on working with institutions and archives. This has led the authors to the conclusion that no objectivised, statistically-aided analysis of social interest topics in contemporary Chinese cultural productions is achievable in these circumstances of restricted access, and that a purely qualitative and selective research approach is the only option available.

As the outcome of the topic analysis, the authors identified three main categories of social interest topics prevalent in the corpus of literary works and cultural productions: (1) social and interpersonal dynamics (marriage, parenting, parent-child relations, relations among social peers); (2) economic and structural pressures (environmental concerns, human cost of China's economic rise, critique of neoliberalism and consumerism, corruption and abuse of power, dilemmas of technological advancement); (3) personal identity and well-being (feminist topics, disillusionment, loneliness, personal traumas). A detailed discussion on how these topics are dealt with in the works analysed, including censorship and artist-audience communication issues, is presented in Jacoby et al. (2024).

Through in-depth readings of a selected corpus of works, the authors propose four heterotopia-inspired templates for analysing how social reality is portrayed and artistic content is delivered in contemporary Chinese cultural productions. These overlapping templates are named heterotopias of (1) transition, (2) compensation and illusion, (3) ambiguity, and (4) dispersed agency. Each of the four types is illustrated in this paper through a concise case study of one artistic work: (1) an exhibition by Wang Guangyi 王广义, (2) a film by Li Ruijun 李睿珺, (3) a short story by Chen Qiufan 陈楸帆, and (4) a play by He Qi 何齐. While the first two are "originally Foucauldian", the latter two, i.e. heterotopia of ambiguity and heterotopia of dispersed agency, even if rooted in the ongoing research on the notion, are the new subcategories proposed here.

Rather than comparing the works, the authors layer them to reveal how they collectively portray shared strategies and engage with cognitive dissonances. As noted, the authors employ heterotopia as a distinctive double-reflection tool for analysing the social dimensions invoked by Chinese artistic and literary works. The authors are aware that cultural texts welcome multiple and reader-dependent reading (see, e.g. Schulzke, 2017), yet our close-reading approach tilts toward an interpretation rooted in theoretical frameworks of heterotopia.

Heterotopia – theoretical foundations

In 1967 Michel Foucault delivered a lecture on heterotopias, later published as "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias". Besides the strong introduction marrying heterotopia with mirror, Foucault listed in the essay six basic principles of the phenomenon (Foucault, 1986). Firstly, no culture in the world fails to establish heterotopia. Secondly, for each society and era, heterotopia has a different and determined function. Thirdly, it is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, incompatible by nature, and, as the fourth principle, it emerges often linked to heterochrony, either represented by the accumulation of time or volatility. Moreover, it presupposes a system of opening and closing, both isolating it and making it penetrable. Lastly, it plays a profound role in relation to all other sites.

Topinka (2010) signals that scholars tend to focus primarily on spatially describable heterotopias (after "Of Other Spaces"), ignoring the concepts of "The Order of Things" (Foucault 1989), which draw our attention to heterotopias as discursive spaces, "thinkable only in language" (Dennis, 2017). This dimension greatly informs our reading of the works analysed, especially Chen Qiufan's short story. Dehaene and De Cauter (2009) describe heterotopia as a realm that is "very broad" and draw attention to the importance of determining whether heterotopia is a consistent and useful concept, or rather "its vagueness has only brought confusion and continues to do so" (p. 91). Sohn (2008) speaks similarly and points out the inherent "otherness" of heterotopia that results in a concept "essentially ambivalent and radically open" (p. 46). Heterotopia remains vague if not placed against Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, genealogy, and new historicism. It is the metaphor that turns us back from the simplified, literal treatment of heterotopia as just another *topia*, or as a counter-site of resistance to ruling powers. Instead, the paradox of heterotopia, as Hetherington (1997) strongly emphasises, rests upon the presumption that it exists only in the space-between, parallelly "revealing the process

of social ordering to be just that, a process rather than a thing" (p. IX). Saco (2002) supports Hetherington's line of argument when she calls heterotopia a kind of betwixt-and-between of "contradiction, of contestation: a space that mimics or simulates lived spaces" (p. 14). It is worth noting that even though re-ordering produced by heterotopia may pose a challenge to hegemonic structures, it is not its primary function. The act of presenting alternative orders does not inherently aim to incite resistance against the dominant structure. This nuance, noticed by Dennis (2017), feels highly relevant in discussing art works from China, a place habitually associated with censorship and political control over cultural production.

However, viewing Foucauldian heterotopia as a spatially anchored 'process' of forming historical and social *a priori*, brings it closer to 'space' in social theory. In reference to Lefebvre's (1991/1974) "conceptual triad", one could argue that the 'spatiality' of heterotopias pops up as lived, perceived, and conceived spaces that clash with each other, consequently providing glimpses of preoccupied orders. The spatial focus balances between referring to real sites, real social orders and their sometimes incompatible real (mirroring) and mythic (inverting, alternating) dimensions (Knight, 2014). The theoretical framework that employs the notion of heterotopia is somewhat similar to inception (Dennis and Tally 2017): the works analysed here are permeated by social order yet manage to "move away" from it far enough to form a space for experimentation.

A multi-layered mirror and the heterotopia of transition

Heterotopia, as mentioned, in Foucauldian epistemology operates as a mirror, by the reflection of which a sort of counteraction on the position that one occupies is forcefully initiated (Foucault, 1986, 24). The work of Wang Guangyi 王广义 (b. 1957) is herein investigated through the lens of the preliminary notes on heterotopia by Foucault and Victor Turner's 'liminoid' theory (Turner 1969, Turner, 1974, Turner 1982), further elaborated below.

Wang Guangyi is one of the most renowned contemporary visual artists in China. Principally a painter, he won international recognition and acclaim thanks to his *Da pipan* 大批判 (*Great Criticism*) series from the 1990s and 2000s. Classified as a leader of the New Art Movement and one of China's main Political Pop artists, Wang became both wealthy and famous but has struggled ever since to break away from the "Political Pop" tag that does not seem to do justice to his diversified and deeply intellectual art. In July 2021, Wang opened a solo exhibition curated by Du Xiyun 杜曦云 – a curator based in Beijing, known for his interest in social topics. Wang's installation, part of Du's series *Wo yu Boyisi* 我与博伊斯 (*Me & Beuys*) and entitled *Renlian shibie – xunzhao Dada ren houyi* 人脸识别 - 寻找鞑靼人后裔 (*[Face Recognition] Find Descendants of Tartars*), was presented at the HOW Art Museum in Shanghai between July and October 2021.

The exhibition did not include any of Wang's famous *Great Criticism* paintings. In fact, not a single painting or sculpture was visible in the gallery. Instead, the visitors entered an empty space with one wall filled with a large projection on which they could see themselves walking through the gallery. The side panel displayed the results of automatic facial recognition analyses of all the visitors. Two additional projections were placed on a smaller, opposite wall. Multiple cameras and projectors hanging from the ceiling completed the scenography. According to the curator's written Introduction, visitors' faces were scanned upon entry, and the algorithms analysed their facial features to determine how far each person exhibited traits of Tartar ancestry. The claimed percentage of Tartar genes of a given person was then projected onto the wall. Most visitors would find that they are quite closely affiliated with the ancient Tartars, and that their Han genes are not as homogenous as they might have thought. The pronounced purpose of the exhibition was to challenge the notion of "race" and show the complexity of the history of the Chinese state and Chinese ethnicity. This already sparked considerable controversy, given the heightened nationalistic sentiment prevalent in China over the last years.

Yet Wang Guangyi's work hid additional layers of meaning. By confronting the audience with issues concerning personal data privacy, and incessant surveillance and profiling², the setup was reminiscent of installations by Marnix de Nijs³, whose projects exploring surveillance technology had previously been exhibited in China³. As in the Dutch artist's installations, Wang's *Renlian shibie*... allowed visitors to observe not only their own faces but, more importantly, the recognition system at work, literally in a

“behind-the-scenes” mode. However, instead of scanning the crowds for crime suspects, this time, the system seemed far more malign in its purpose. Pointing out the ancestral origins of passersby, the setup served as a trigger for unexpected break-out, diverting the focus from the privacy violation to visitors’ personal confrontation with the results of ethnicity analysis. In this way, the installation echoed ongoing discussion about *Han-ness* as an imposed identity integral to Chinese statehood (Joniak-Lüthi, 2015, 120). The project thus prompted a dual mode of reflection: an insight suspended somewhere between “coming-from-the-outside”

state-driven narratives and “coming-from-me” (“coming-from-the-majority”) unspoken agreement on Han centrality.

This duality built a heterotopic artistic construct in which technology played a crucial role. The exhibition space, akin to Foucauldian mirror (Foucault, 1986), induced a ‘liminoid’ experience (Turner, 1969, 1974, 1982)) - precarious in essence—that juxtaposed viewers with a new ethnic “allocation” conducted through computational assessment. Foucault’s words fit the reception of the work:

From the standpoint of the mirror, I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, [...] I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. (Foucault, 1986, p. 24).

Not only the marginal transition projected by Wang seemed akin to ‘liminoid’ phenomena described by Turner (1974)—as “parts of social critiques or even revolutionary manifestoes - books, plays, paintings, films, etc., exposing the injustices, inefficiencies, and immoralities of the mainstream economic and political structures and organisations” (p. 86). It extended beyond it. The injection of a “viral” Tartar identity, provoking questions of who we are, how we are perceived, and how we are classified, encouraged participants to confront truths that may have been more or less consciously suppressed. There was no commentary on what the visitors saw in the projection’s “mirror”—no interpretation, no clearly voiced direction was given. While the observers were left puzzled, disappointed, or even disturbed, the momentum for suspension of their social status occurred collaterally. By and large, the exhibition reformulated the meaning of the surrounding. It operated as a profoundly heterotopic mirror - reflecting both the true and the artificially rendered present, destabilising the picture of Chinese society, and fostering a reflection of one’s understanding of the centrality of Han ethnic identity. Notwithstanding, the exhibition, aligning technology and humans in short-circuit of doubled reflection, demonstrated that it is through social agreement on the one hand and collecting and manipulating data on the other, that the ethnic identity of an individual is renegotiated. This relates to yet another face recognition project, by an artist, academic and technology expert Fei Jun 费俊 (b. 1970) – *Youqu de shijie 有趣的世界 (Interesting World)* presented in the Chinese Pavillion at the Venice Biennale in 2019. Fei Jun’s work, in which an algorithm produces an image it considers best suited to a given visitor’s emotions, also bases on the concept of machines categorising humans and deciding on their relation to a given set of definitions.

Even though it is almost impossible to avoid multiple on-street cameras and the overwhelming surveillance tech infrastructure⁴, self-reflexivity nurtured by art such as Wang’s [*Face Recognition*] might prove subversive. Wang Guangyi’s *Find Descendants of Tartars* project placed the exhibition visitors in an unfamiliar space of discomfort, heterotopic locus, where they needed to define how they view, or, after Foucault, study, analyse, describe, and “read” (Foucault, 1986, 26) the reality unveiled and occasionally manifested. The installation facilitates a moment of self-examination, an exercise of personal and collective identity. The lack of interpretative guidance could potentially intensify the renegotiation of the self-concept. This aspect of Wang’s work situates it within the framework of a ‘heterotopia of transition’, suggesting the potential for a ‘now or never’ identity shift. It detaches the exhibition viewer from themselves, leaving them in a state of non-conceptual ‘bareness’ while critically examining ethnicity as an artificially constructed social consensus.

Walking past all the perfect futures: Heterotopia of compensation

Heterotopia of compensation points to spaces of escape from the disorderly world of the here and now; spaces that do exist in reality, but are at the same time unstable, virtually unachievable and, as such, illusionary ideal other places. Chinese films, especially in the broad category of art-house (as defined by King, (2019)) of the last decade relate to the realities they describe in a way that is very close to the

Foucauldian mirror metaphor mentioned above. As they are generally keeping to the realist tradition of Chinese cinema (see McGrath, 2022) and rarely distinctively experiment with form or cinematic language, this feature presents itself mostly on the level of the plot. And the message found in their narratives of an alternative vision of (my place in) society tends to turn into an inherent, subtle social critique. But what is more important, the artists make their characters pass from one real world to another world that is real in itself but yet somehow unstable, almost unachievable, fragile, but also very telling as concerns the reality it stems from. It might be a “heterotopia of deviation” or “heterotopias of crisis” (Foucault, 1986, p.25), as in *Baobeier* 宝贝儿 (Baby) (dir. Liu Jie 刘杰, 2018), a film describing the ill fates of a specific strata of Chinese society (foster care children and parents, the disabled etc.), or “heterotopia of illusion”, which “exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory” (Foucault, 1986, p. 26) as in *Kong shan yike* 空山异客 (*Ghost in the Mountains*) (dir. Yang Heng 杨恒, 2017), a fairly experimental story of a character on a way back to his home region⁵, starting with a news report about his own death. But possibly the most important and dominant of them is “heterotopia of compensation”.

Foucault (1986) defines heterotopia of compensation as “a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (p. 27). As an example, he mentions certain colonies founded by the English Puritans in America that worked according to a perfect, preestablished order, “marvellous, absolutely regulated” (p 27). What makes the difference between heterotopia of compensation and utopia is that, according to Foucault (1986), utopias are unreal in nature, “sites with no real place” (p. 24), albeit there exists a strong relation between these two and the realities or un-realities they represent. Also, in the context of this study, utopia, in its lofty, placeless, spatially and temporally almost indefinable nature, remains within the realm of ideological dreams, while heterotopias are personal or semi-personal, tangible places rooted firmly in reachable reality. Heterotopias of compensation are real in the sense of providing a functional, (almost) immediately applicable sets of rules and thus creating perfection in comparison to the disorderly world of the here and now. However, they tend to collapse into heterotopias of illusion, another dimension of Foucault’s sixth principle of heterotopia, that functions as a revelation of the illusory nature of the reality we live in.

Similar spaces can be encountered in Chinese films that deal with people in the mid-to-lower financial strata of society. *Luguo weilai* 路过未来 (*Walking Past the Future*), a film directed by Li Ruijun and released in 2017 is one such example.

Li Ruijun, called “a promising newcomer” (p. 216) by Li (2018), is now a well-established art-house film director and screenwriter, “a true successor of the Chinese New Wave Cinema” (Wang, 2018). Li is a thematically consistent creator. Whether in his second film *Lao lūtou* 老驴头 (*Old Donkey*) (2010) or his latest one *Yinru chenyan* 隐入尘烟 (*Return to Dust*), one can often find personal stories of people in conflict with authorities (not necessarily political). As this conflict imposes on them an unwelcome (dis)order, they search for a personal place of peace which might function not against but somehow aligned with these external forces.

Walking Past the Future tells the story of Yang Yaoting 杨耀婷, a young factory worker in Shenzhen 深圳, struggling in the harsh economic environment of the „new poor” (Wang, 2018, p. 79) working class. She and her family decide to move back to their ancestral home in Gansu province to make their living as farmers but encounter numerous challenges there as well. To afford a new apartment for the whole family, Yaoting returns to Shenzhen and participates in illegal drug testing trials. She develops a serious liver condition but lacks the funds for a transplant, and in the end, moves back to Gansu again.

The Gansu province in the film functions as a multi-layered heterotopia of compensation, an “absolutely perfect other place” (Foucault, 1986, p. 27), seemingly within reach, and in sharp contrast to the reality of the characters’ here and now. After spending 25 years in Shenzhen, Gansu feels to Yaoting’s parents as something “other”, while it is almost unknown to Yaoting herself and her younger sister, and thus easily idealised. Their ancestral home represents the simplicity of agricultural life, the presumed stability against the harsh realities of Shenzhen, a “peaceful, beautiful home for its residents” as they hear on the radio before their trip there. The reality turns out differently - the land doesn’t belong to the family anymore, and they discover that they are physically not able to work in the field. Yaoting feels there is no choice but to return to Shenzhen to earn money for her flat.

For Yaoting, a sort of compensation is not restricted to her Gansu home. There are three other heterotopia-like places in the film which offer her such idealised spaces. One is her dream flat - perfect in the sense of being modern, well-equipped, and just within reach with one simple money transfer, yet so far away exactly because of the same thing. The other is the chip factory she works in - a place so perfectly organised and requiring such purity that it stands in sharp contrast to the messiness of the reality behind the production lines. Thus, it corresponds well to Foucault's (1986) fifth principle of heterotopia - it is open and closed at the same time and requires a certain kind of purification to enter.⁶ The third one is the hospital where the drug testing takes place. The rules are clear - you take the drug, you rest for the night, you sign, you get your money. But what the medical procedure promises, disappears into the blue due to the harmful consequences on Yaoting's body. Her perfect world becomes unattainable. As she is riding a train towards the end of the film, Gansu comes back to her in a dream, as a pure place of inner peace, a hope of a healthy and orderly life away from Shenzhen. Although the dreamy sequence does not show a real space *per se*, we can read this on a symbolic level. Her dream during a very real train journey shows two, interconnected types of heterotopias - illusion and compensation. And the train itself is something that for Foucault represents heterotopia *par excellence*, a place without a place.

The characters of *Walking Past the Future* long to find peace and stability in some idealised 'other place,' leaving behind the harsh reality that they know all too well. Sometimes, sacrificing one's health or engaging in crime seems to them as the only way to reach another "other" that is not a utopian, lofty, cosmos-wide space, but a personal heterotopia of peace, harmony and order.⁷

Out of a skinner box: Chen Qiufan's State of Trance as a heterotopia of ambiguity

Heterotopia of ambiguity is not a term proposed by Foucault. The sense of ambiguity is, however, an inherent part of Foucault's concept. Heterotopia of ambiguity renders uncertainty as constitutive of viewed and experienced reality, with destabilized logic as its part, which is not always soothingly explained in an artwork.

Chen Qiufan (b. 1981), also known as Stanley Chen, is considered one of the most prominent representatives of the Chinese sci-fi new wave. Chen's writings quite often revolve around the protagonists' internal struggles to assimilate in the futuristic settings of the Great Acceleration. When discussing his creative objectives, he draws a parallel of a "fun-house mirror reflecting real light in a way that is more dazzling to the eyes" (Liu, 2021).

Chen's short story "Chushen zhuangtai" 出神状态 ("State of Trance"), published in 2018, was co-authored by an AI algorithm trained on Chen's writing. Not long after its publication, "State of Trance" earned a literary prize in a competition conducted by an AI judge, winning over a piece written by the lionised Nobel Prize literature winner, Mo Yan. Chen's readiness to embrace technological novelty and the sensational victory brought him and the story much publicity and success. Both Chen Qiufan and his work analysed here are present in China's debate on AI and its participation in artistic practices (Strafella & Berg, 2023). Generative art and "delegated artistic creativity" (ibid.) constitute a cutting-edge field for experiments that nonetheless remain rooted in social contexts and art traditions.

State of Trance protagonist - "you" (the work is written in the second person) - on the final night before the demise of the human race, sets out on a mission that seems quite trivial: "you" leaves the apartment to return a book to the Shanghai Library, as the author comments, "in a final bid to uphold the tattered social contract" (Chen, 2020). Libraries represent semiotically loaded spaces, much bigger on the inside than they appear on the outside since they accumulate "all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes" (Foucault, 1986, p. 26; Radford et al., 2015, p. 739). The narrative of *State of Trance* takes note of the heterotopic characteristics of the Shanghai Library, calling it a "shrine of knowledge" and "heritage of human knowledge" (Chen 2020, p. 158); and the protagonist ascends its stairs "like a monarch" (p. 158). Yet the resolution to return the book seems pointless not only because the world is collapsing. Also, humans are no longer intellectually capable of reading books - their attention has become like "the filling of a custard bun" (p. 149), and turning savage, they "literally eat" (p. 147) books in the library, rather than read them. The protagonist can barely read the very telling title of the book they carry: *Brain Entropy: A Theory of Neurocognition*. This combination of motifs: the library as the final destination of the

protagonist, and inability to read books (and, effectively, process information within them) brings associations with Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Library of Babel", in which the whole universe is confined to a vast library, where all the stored works are nonsensical.⁸

We do not know much about the cause or the nature of the epistemic catastrophe that struck human civilization in the story. We only learn that this transition toward the post-Anthropocene seems justified, as, in the words of the narrator, "the guardians of order have all disappeared, or you could say that they have deconstructed themselves" (Chen, 2020, p. 148). The heterotopic, mirror-like quality of the situation is veiled in an ambiguous warning:

That's because the threat hasn't come from the outside, like in the science-fiction movies [...]. The most lethal threats often come from the self, something that constitutes you, something you were once very proud of, rationality, emotion, love, humanity, or whatever. (pp. 148-149)

Disposition (dispose to transpose)⁹ and dislocation (dislocate to transit) constitute two out of three processes that Higgins and Leps (2022) identified as means to, paraphrasing Foucault, "shake the familiarities of thought" (p. 18). The situation imagined by Chen Qiufan disposes well-known orders to transpose readers onto new epistemological grounds. Dislocation (or even dispersing) of all the established truths in this world makes the transition toward the post-Anthropocene era imaginable; in fact, this is where the story leads.

Creative experimentation with AI in the "State of Trance" forms another dimension of heterotopia. Siebers (1994) emphasises the multiplicity of truths as characteristic of heterotopian texts, but in this instance, the focus shifts to the ambivalence of meaning or even defiance of habitual reading and writing practices. The algorithm's contribution in "State of Trance", even though it was trained on Chen Qiufan's writings, does not comply with any commonly accepted logic. Chen did not edit the AI-generated output and had to work out a plot in a way that could make use of the often-nonsensical phrases (Grogan, 2020). The outcome of his work, nevertheless, still poses a challenge to our ordinary reading practice.

In the text, the symbols "appear randomly" and "cannot provoke any meaningful reaction" in the protagonist's brain (Chen, 2020c, p. 150). Any dialogue that the protagonist's consciousness "on the cusp of disintegration" initiates is "profoundly meaningful, brilliantly insightful" and yet "totally incomprehensible". "You" is struck with the beauty of the expressway, calling it "a long fuse lacerating the night" (p. 155), while they wander through the metropolitan "museum of pain" (p. 156). Even if "all the plans to restart the [human] mind have failed" (p. 153) in the final hours of the Anthropocene, the protagonist still clings to learned and habitual behaviours, which in this story is metaphorically named a "Skinner box" (p. 153) – a conditioning chamber for laboratory tests, synonymous with "an internalized heritage of civilization" (p. 153).

In their final change of heart, they drop the book to the floor and walk out "into the ancient, into the new world. Into me." (p. 159). Is the story told from the perspective of some post-human being or even a sentient entity? Perhaps the "you-me" dynamic of narrating and reading the text pushes the reader into imagining what the "new world/me" that comes at the end might look like. The shift of perspectives (the "you" protagonist) may also hint at futuristic, yet already present patterns of culture consumption among young, tech-savvy Chinese. The "state of trance" and the route taken by the protagonist may dramatize reading into an act more similar to experiencing virtual reality. Another reading could hint towards Chen's awareness of dilemmas felt by authors born after 1978, once called by another giant of Chinese Sci-Fi Han Song 韩松, a "Torn Generation" (Chen, 2014). Han notes in an essay: "China is being ripped apart at an accelerated pace. [...] Everything, from spiritual dreams to the reality of life, is torn" (as cited in Chen, 2014). The main elements of the story, despite its avant-gardist flavour, can be transposed into the reality described by Han. The protagonist seems utterly fascinated by the modern metropolis, even if they cannot fully grasp its functioning, neither can they connect with the crowds in any meaningful manner. The AI-Input is spoken by a monument, which could represent tradition, at this point – Incomprehensible. Despite the cutting-edge nature of artificial intelligence, it is trained by huge volumes of data which exclusively come from our past; using a symbol of historical heritage to convey the AI-produced message poignantly depicts that paradox.

Chen Qiufan's engagement with technology and refraining from dystopian tones in his description of human demise, create an atmosphere of ambiguity. A catastrophe is approaching, but the protagonist is far from despair. They keenly observe the increasingly alien reality with his diminishing intellectual abilities and stubbornly pursues their ludicrous mission of returning the book to the library, which itself becomes a monument to the world and the social order on the verge of extinction. The ultra-modern megacity does not provide logic and rationality that lay the foundation of orders – be they labelled “Chinese”, “modern”, “social” or “universal”. This detachment constitutes the heterotopian reading of *State of Trance*.

Chen's work depicts a space of cognitive dissonance, where past and future, human and post-human, sense and nonsense, coexist without resolution. This indeterminacy is precisely its function: to provoke reflection on the instability of knowledge, the fluidity of meaning, and the ways in which humanity negotiates its place in an increasingly alien reality. The authors refer to Chen's piece of experimental fiction as a heterotopia of ambiguity to emphasize the destabilization of meaning that permeates all layers of the text. Chen embraces randomized uncertainty as a literary device, thus juxtaposing two kinds of creativity – human and machine-generated with intentions and effect that resist fixed interpretation. The former (AI-produced “uncertainty”) constitutes epistemological and aesthetical heterotopian practice, while the latter (lack of fixed interpretation) moves the practice toward the ambiguous.

Echoing: The seagull: a heterotopia of dispersed agency

Heterotopia of dispersed agency in terms of theatrical space foregrounds the shifting nature of responsibility, intention, and effect across multiple agents: performers and audiences, human and nonhuman, individual and collective (including socio-political forces).

In the first paragraph of *Of Other Spaces* Foucault (1986) writes:

“We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein”

(p. 22). In the same text, theatre emerges as an explicit heterotopia, profoundly agential “in the epoch of simultaneity, (...) juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed” (p. 22). Thus, it is the theatre that “brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another” (p. 25). Joanne Tompkins (2014), the author of *Theatre's Heterotopias: Performance and the Cultural Politics of Space* advocates for the usefulness of heterotopia as a tool for “rendering more palpable both the spatial and the socio-political possibilities that theatre presents” (p. 15). The connection suggested by Tompkins between the “palpability” of the theatre and an abstractly existing “possibility” of its phantasmagoria, then amplified by concrete and potential socio-political environs, emphasises the heterotopic quality inherent to all theatre genres – a clash of the requisite physical participation and theatre's alternative worldmaking. Similarly, *Xiari shengxiang: Hai'ou* 夏日声响: 海鸥 (*Echoing: The Seagull*) written by Hu Xuanyi 胡璇艺 (b. 1994), directed by He Qi (b. 1992), and staged by Shuibuhao de gongzuoshi 睡不好的工作室 (The Sleepy-less Ensemble) provides the physical stage arrangements, props and characters, and casts a net of heterotopia onto foreign spatialities, zooming in on the agency of the ‘other spaces’.

Echoing: The Seagull is a youthful interplay with Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Both scenarios carry the hope of renewal. Chekhov's drama is deeply entrenched in the sentiments of pre-revolutionary Russia, emphasising the audacity and indolence of the affluent, their bigotry and arrogance, contrasting these with the destitution and ignorance of the rest of the ‘abandoned’ society (Mann, 1977 p. 34). The adaptation by Hu Xuanyi presents a similar, geographically and politically rendered realm of a Chinese small town, where the dreams of young and creative graduates are juxtaposed with the harsh reality where everything deemed superfluous, incongruent, or financially incalculable gets systematically eliminated. Hu's rendition is a composite of loosely interwoven narrative threads, protagonists' characteristics, and excerpts from *The Seagull* dialogues, integrated with personal biographies of the actors, and then recounted as a story revolving around the revisional journey of Konstantin's spectre haunting the old neighbourhood. The 174 candidates for the roles in Hu's play were required to first complete comprehensive questionnaires detailing their lives¹⁰. This uncommon auditioning pattern, practised by the Sleepy-less Ensemble since the production of

Wo he wo siren de Xinhua zidian 我和我私人的新华字典 (Me and My Private Xinhua Dictionary) of 2022, shows affinity to documentary theatre and goes hand in hand with an increasingly visible approach among Chinese directors towards 'demystifying' the stage and bringing 'mediocre' social voices onto it. *Meihao yitian* 美好的一天 (*One Fine Day*) series by Li Jianjun 李建军 (b. 1974) might serve as another example of this trend. In the production, first staged in 2013 and produced until 2022 in five site-specific versions in five Chinese cities, Li uses Brechtian-like radio to give voice to the amateurs and ordinary people talking about their stories on stage onto individual microphones set at different channels. The audience is then free to change the channels and listen to the stories they themselves chose. As the actors are ordinary city inhabitants from all walks of life, the stories are unique for each city in which the production is staged.

Echoing... is, similarly, a multiperspective jigsaw. It combines the authentic biographies of He Qi (the director; Konstantin), Hou Ying (Nina), Wang Yimeng (Xiaoming), Zhang Chengzi (Chengzi) and Xu Jie (Xuxu), with Chekhov's archetypes.

The story is divided into two parts, the first of which starts in 2023 during the Chinese New Year's Eve and lasts up to the seventh day of the lunar year, while the second is set two years later, altogether closing in the three-year chronotope (2023–2025). Before the beginning of the first part, five schoolmates rehearse Chekhov's *The Seagull* during the summer break after completing their second grade at school. This short scene is followed by documentary footage displayed on the back screen, providing additional context to the period of 2016–2022. The roughly cut video presents clips with the flickering pictures of the beginning of the Donald Trump presidency, the #MeToo movement, the "yellow vests" protests in Paris, Mark Zuckerberg's hearings at the US Congress, the Taobao Single's Day new record of 10 billion RMB in 96 seconds, the outbreak of COVID-19, the George Floyd protests, and the concealment of the youth unemployment statistics by the Chinese Ministry of Information. The audience is bombarded with the crude and brutal information stream, provoking a nearly 'palpable' conclusion that the entire world is losing its clarity and that everyone is accountable for its failures. The rapid succession of real-life events produces a daunting simultaneity of past, present, and future. This is just the opening phase, where ethereality of the stage interweaves with the tangibility of real life, and dramatically fixed threads dissolve into fluid, precarious, and open-to-change narratives, embodying the characteristics of the 'liquid modernity'—a condition in which, to use Zygmunt Bauman's term (Bauman & Leoncini 2018), we live. The inclusion of the cast's personal experiences, radical-in-tone and emotionally gripping news, as well as the direct references to the living conditions of young Chinese in this semi-fictional world, allows the director and playwright to set up a game with the networked architecture of social assemblages which break through categories of truth, materiality, and independency, instead focusing on an environmentally 'diffused' agency. This very beginning already triggers a state of heterotopia, as it is from now on that the 'echo' of Konstantin's suicide vibrates through the characters and the audience, its weight of responsibility constantly relocating between individual agency and collectively determined yet hardly avoidable causality. The main performance unfolds against the backdrop of the film and the rehearsal of *The Seagull*.

The spirit of Konstantin returns to town to reproachfully pinpoint his/her colleagues' conformist attitudes, accusing them of being personal sell-outs and acutely indicating the reason why their lives became pointless. As a counterpoint, the biographies of the four actors emerge, written as a streak of compromises. Nina, who was brought up within the confines of systemic dance education sponsored by her father, dreams of getting rid of financial dependency, and finally decides to work in a local McDonald's. Xiao Ming, once a student at a prestigious university in Beijing, becomes an intern at a new media publishing house. He first writes poetry and opens an account on Xiaohongshu¹¹, but ultimately gives it all up, and makes popular, Internet, collage-style poems. Xuxu wants to be an actress, but she is only able to work as an extra in low-quality productions; family debts force her to earn a living by doing e-commerce livestreams. Chengzi works as a mathematics teacher at a primary school. It isn't until after her grandmother's death that she finally gets a room in an apartment, where she lives with her family of six.

It turns out that all the ambitions and lofty plans of the young inhabitants of this small town get digested and utilised by the phantom of a large metropolis which in its rapid growth finally breaks into the town and swallows it - as is highlighted by the symbol of the construction of a new metro line.

Hu's play, much like Chekhov's original work, remains incomplete. "The Seagull" comically denounces the characters' lust for fame and riches as they struggle with modernity, but it also hints at an alternative. It is Nina in whom both Chekhov and Hu place their hope for a possible way out: her ability to subdue poetical but unrealistic desires, while simultaneously not succumbing to the pure pursuit of financial gains and consumption. Nina, who ultimately rejects her father's financial assistance and gets a job at a hotel, remains socially active. When Chengzi hosts a wedding party in their hometown, Nina is the only one who decides to attend it in person, while the others only make an effort of a single phone call. Nina makes the heterotopic 'jump out' of the overwhelming economic, political, and social order. In other words, she wrestles accountability back to herself. In this way she, rather than Konstantin is the true winner in the game, she is the true seagull.

The specificity of heterotopia in *Echoing: The Seagull* lies in the self-reflective call made by a young generation to thrive in society on their own terms, rather than try to escape from it; to show responsibility for creating it as a meaningful place of existence. One might ask after Bruno Latour (2005): "What happens when we practise the two gestures - localising the global and distributing the local - together?" (p. 219). The answer is as follows:

Sites, now transformed into actor-networks for good, are moved to the background; connections, vehicles, and attachments are brought into the foreground. As soon as we do this, we end up with a superposition of various canals as entangled and varied as those that an anatomist would see if she could simultaneously colour all the nerve, blood, lymph, and hormone pathways that keep organisms in existence. (Latour, 2005, p. 220)

This also resembles John Law's (1994) discussion on 'the networks of agency', strongly inspired by Goffman's symbolic interactionism:

Each one of us is an arrangement. That arrangement is more or less fragile. There are ordering processes which keep (or fail to keep) that arrangement on the road. And some of those processes, though precious few, are partially under our control some of the time. (p. 33)

The proposed framing of heterotopia in *Echoing: the Seagull* assumes the networked agency, entangling individual struggles with global forces. Such reconceptualization points out to theatre's long-established socio-political engagement. Rather than focusing solely on state-induced social drawbacks, the heterotopic lens highlights the pervasive apathy among young Chinese audiences—trapped in online echo chambers that obscure their own inertia and confusion.

The creators, through devices like a theatrical program styled as a McDonald's leaflet featuring cast bios, urge engagement and action. Theatrical heterotopia of dispersed agency thus becomes a fresh continuation of *Zeittheater* in the tradition of Schiller and Piscator, its edge directed at the Chinese youth and their post-pandemic lethargy. In Latourian spirit, *Echoing: the Seagull* seeks to bring the dormant actors to the foreground once again.

Conclusion

The title of this paper is inspired by a quote from Chen Qiufan's *State of Trance* (Chen 2020b, 154/5): "Resistance and obedience are two sides of the mirror - you require this kind of illusion." Strafella and Berg (2023) see it as an "allusion to navigating the pitfalls of writing, publishing, censorship, and the government's demands" (p. 482). The three poles: resistance-obedience-illusion, may also sum up the heterotopian reading of the Chinese texts analysed here. They offer a challenge without posing a threat against socio-political system, and they point towards the illusionary nature of our paradigms and constructs.

In this paper, the authors have argued that using Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia can serve as an interpretative tool for understanding different facets of modern Chinese society as portrayed in cultural productions and artistic works of the Xi Jinping era. Many of these works are purposefully ambiguous, either in the way their authors construct reality, shape the actions and behaviour of the protagonists, or communicate the message of their narratives. In these multiple worlds created on stage, in a gallery, film or literature, parallel and yet somewhat detached from our everyday experiences, one can see a sharp and fresh reflection of today's China.

As shown in the analysis, heterotopia of transition, by mirroring certain aspects of social existence, enables the audience to develop a new understanding of reality and simplifies identity constructs. Heterotopia of compensation can be employed to express the urge to escape the here and now, but the idealised worlds thus created require a wrong path of purification upon entry and, in the end, usually fail to materialise, becoming heterotopias of illusion instead. Heterotopia of ambiguity shows the fragility of the power-knowledge relations and the illusory nature of the social contract. And finally, the heterotopia of dispersed agency provides possible alternatives for young Chinese struggling in the era of informational chaos, atomized social relations, and overwhelming commodification.

The four works analysed in this paper, using the framework of Foucault's heterotopia, provide glimpses of the Chinese society of today and its challenges, such as party-state surveillance, economic pressure, urbanisation and health issues, but also young people's dreams and aspirations. Although the method used in the research presented in this paper does not provide objectivised conclusions that might be representative of Chinese society as a whole, it nevertheless offers, as the authors believe, a new perspective on how the current, many-faceted and complex social reality is presented by Chinese artists and communicated to their audiences.

Notes

1. *Shenpi* (examination and approval) is an obligatory process of securing acceptance by relative authorities for any artistic production or content made available to the public, including music, film, stage productions, art exhibitions, or literary publications. General guidelines are provided in laws (e.g. the 2002 Regulations on the Administration of Movies, the 1997 Regulations on Administration of Commercial Performances, or the 2002 Regulations on the Administration of Audiovisual Products), but specific interpretations of what is allowed and what is to be censored lie with the *shenpi* granting authorities, for example the Municipal/Provincial Bureaus of Culture (artistic events), or the National Radio and Television Bureau (film distribution).
2. As confirmed in a private talk with the curator (personal communication, 26th October 2023).
3. De Nijs presented three such exhibitions in China at least on four occasions, between 2011 and 2019 in Beijing, Songzhuang and Shenzhen.
4. Various Chinese artists address the subject of surveillance and personal data protection. Suffice to say, *Yi chang xiaoshi de yundong* 一场消失的运动 (A Disappeared Movement) by Deng Yufeng (邓玉峰) from May 2020, in which ten performers attempted to evade the street surveillance system along the Xingfu Street in Beijing's Chaoyang District, or his 2018 project *34.6 wan Wuhan gongmin de mimi* 34.6 万武汉公民的秘密 (346,000 Wuhan Citizens' Secret) in which he first legally purchased and then publicly exhibited personal information of thousands of inhabitants of the city of Wuhan.
5. The motif of returning home (to a birthplace, ancestral home etc.) is, generally, quite often present in Chinese cinema of the last decade, besides *Ghost in the Mountains* we can mention, for example, *Sun Mao* 榭卯, (*Country Far Away*) (dir. Gan Xiao'er 甘小二, 2017), *Shan he diren* 山河故人 (*Mountains May Depart*) (dir. Jia Zhangke, 2015) or Li Ruijun's film analysed later in this article. In each of these films, this motif can represent and be interpreted as a (functionally) different type of heterotopia, but in the end, as shown in the analysis below, they tend to merge, mix and intermingle.
6. Another dimension of heterotopias of compensation present in Chinese art-house cinema of the last ten years is the 'purification by crime' - a way to temporarily distance oneself from reality through criminal activity. In Kun Zhao's (2022) words, when he writes about the fiction of Ban Yu 班宇: "[It] reveals an ethical predicament: In this place, illegal actions that break social rules have become the only sustainable way of life" (p. 195). Such are the attempts of smugglers of iPhones from Hong Kong in *Guo chuntian* 过春天 (*The Crossing*) (dir. Bai Xue 白雪, 2019), a petty criminal in *Yema fen zong* 野马分鬃 (*Striding into Wind*) (dir. Wei Shujun 魏书钧, 2021), a mother and a daughter who become kidnappers in *Tuzi baoli* 兔子暴力 (*Old Town Girls*) (dir. Shen Yu 申瑜, 2020) or a couple of serial murderers of rural origin in A Yi's (阿乙) 2018 novel *Zaoshang jiudian jiaoxing wo* 早上九点叫醒我 (*Wake me up at 9:00 in the morning*).
7. Creating spaces of compensation can be observed across a wide spectrum of Chinese cultural and artistic productions. Liang Hong 梁鸿, a writer and academic, portrays the vanishing Chinese countryside through a romanticised vision of *human stories* both in her non-fiction writing (*Zhongguo zai Liangzhuang* (Liang 2021, 2023) *中国在梁庄 China in One Village: The Story of One Town and a Changing World*), as well as her works of fiction (*Shensheng jiazu* 神圣家族 *The Sacred Clan*). In visual arts, a well-known painter Zhao Bandi 赵半狄 creates spaces of compensation in his installation *Zhaobandi de xiaowo* 赵半狄的小窝 (*Zhao Bandi's Hut*), which began in November 2020 in Shanghai. The project, curated by Du Xiyun (similar to Wang Guangyi's exhibition on the Tartars), was initially Zhao's reaction to the depressive reality of the pandemic

lockdowns. A cosy, safe ‘ark’ created in a gallery space became a safe and welcome space for ordinary visitors to talk about traumas, well-hidden family tragedies or loneliness. The hut travelled to multiple cities, and the stories were recorded, building an expanding archive available on the curator Du’s personal WeChat Channel. The heterotopia of compensation in theatre can be seen in a 2023 play *Rujin wo yansu de zai xueyuan shang fenbu ai yu mengjing*—*zhe ju bu shi zhende* 如今我严肃地在雪原上缝补爱与梦境——这句话不是真的 (*Now I am seriously mending love and dreams on the snowy plains - this sentence is not true*; staged also under the title *El fondo un campo de nieve*) by Zhou Zhongyu 周仲玉. In the play, alienation and psychological weakness that hinders action lead to the state where the process of redesigning society can only happen in the realm of imagination. Only there can feminism, equality and social activism flourish in action, and achieve their goals.

8. Drawing this similarity creates another layer of conceptual connection with the notion of heterotopia. It was, after all, another work of Borges, “Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge” that partly inspired Foucault’s elaboration of heterotopia.
9. In the use presented by Higgins and Leps, “disposition” points toward making a situation understandable in the context of power-knowledge relation, part of Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge.
10. Based on private correspondence with Hu Xuanyi.
11. Xiaohongshu 小红书 (Little Red Book) is a Chinese social media and e-commerce platform, similar to Instagram.

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Pessoptimist About China's Future: Scientific Progress and Social Harmony in *Hospital* by Han Song and *Nova* by Cao Fei

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Abstract

This paper analyses the critical responses to the official Chinese Communist Party narratives of scientific progress and social harmony found in Han Song's 韩松 2016 novel *Hospital* (医院, *Yiyuan*) and Cao Fei's 曹斐 2019 film *Nova* (新星, *Xin xing*). Both works challenge the state's vision of a technologically determined, utopian future. The study explores how these texts subvert the official discourse by critically examining four thematic areas: the relationship between past and future, China and the outside world; the personal dimension of the quest for scientific progress; the disconnect between state-level achievements and the livelihood of ordinary citizens; and the concept of personal freedom and happiness. Both works depict a relentless pursuit of progress that leads to the erosion of individual agency, transforming citizens into objects of (bio)technological experimentation. By offering counter-narratives to the state's sociotechnical imaginary, Han Song and Cao Fei provide an ambivalent vision of China's future, one rooted in the anxieties of its present.

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Keywords

Han Song, Cao Fei, post-humanism, pessoptimism

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Introduction

Scientific advancement is one of the cornerstones of the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) identity as a state. Faith in progress and ambitious future development plans are what unite otherwise very different periods of PRC history: the Mao era, Deng Xiaoping's "reforms and opening up," and the present, Xi Jinping's "New Era."

Science is habitually defined as objective investigation of the natural world, but in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) discourse, the term carries both technical and political weight. Since Mao's era, following Soviet models, the party has fused scientific rationality with political legitimacy, so that declaring a policy "scientific" simultaneously asserts its inevitability and correctness (Bandurski, 2023). The most recent example would include Xi Jinping's claims that "scientific socialism" – one that is proven in practice – is better than the "utopian one" (Tsang, 2023). Chinese scientism, as described in the now-classical work by Kwok (1965) and revisited by Hua Shiping (1995), has maintained its presence in CCP discourse despite mounting critiques as a pseudo-religious concept (Peels, 2023).

Putting affirmative works forming part of the official propaganda aside, Chinese visual artists and authors of literary texts have been responding to this confidence in science expressed by the communist party in various ways. Some have used irony and pastiche, for example, Yu Hua 余华 in *China in Ten Words* or Yan Lianke 阎连科 in *The Explosion Chronicles*. Others reflected on the social and environmental costs of rapid development, such as visual artist Wang Jiuliang 王久良 in his videos *Beijing Besieged by Waste, Plastic China* and *The Land*, Wen Fang 文芳 in her powerful installation *Terra Cotta Migrant Laborers of People's Republic*, or Liu Xiaodong 刘小东 in his paintings in the *Three Gorges Migrants* series. Others still explored how technological progress endangers personal freedom, for example, Wang Guangyi 王广义 in his installation [*Face Recognition*] *Find Descendants of Tartars* or writer Chen Qiufan 陈楸帆 in his short story *The Fish of Lijiang*.

Two recent works, a novel *Hospital* (医院, *Yiyuan*) by Han Song 韩松 from 2016 and a science fiction feature film of a celebrated visual artist Cao Fei 曹斐 entitled *Nova* (新星, *Xin xing*) from 2019, offer fascinating, complex and multi-layered responses to the call for scientific supremacy of China and the promise of building a harmonious society by embracing progress.

The paper examines how these two works critically respond to the official scientific progress narrative. The discussion includes the following subtopics:

- The relationship between the past and the future, China and the outside world.
- Personal dimension of the quest for scientific progress.
- Technological successes of the state and the livelihood of the common folk.
- The view of future society: personal freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

In this paper, we aim to provide a glimpse of some of the critical responses of artists and intellectuals to the official party discourse. While our two chosen works by Han Song

and Cao Fei cannot be deemed representative of how the Chinese state's quest for progress and the promise of a harmonious future are viewed by the Chinese society at large, we believe that they contain a wealth of material useful in understanding complex social reactions to these core topics of PRC propaganda.

Both artists present visions of possible futures, deeply rooted in the country's present and past experiences, but alternative to the official party promise. Labelled as sinotopia (中托邦, *zhongtuobang*) by Han Song himself, and described in various ways by scholars (Sino-futurism, hallucinatory realism, and proleptic nostalgia), these artistic visions tell us perhaps more about China's present than about the unknown future.

These two visions can be considered "punk," to borrow the wording from *Hospital*, in the sense that they do not reproduce "real-life predictions" about the future but subvert it by offering alternatives that move away from the scientific-socialist vision set by mainstream discourse.

Methodological Approach

Han Song coined the very evocative term of sinotopia, which he used in one of his feature columns to describe a prediction that the entire world is moving towards becoming like China (Han, 2011). Han Song himself has not elaborated much on the notion, although he revisited it in 2022 (Han, 2022); the term was picked by Song Mingwei, a scholar who contributed probably the most in-depth scholarship on Han Song's writing. According to Song's (2023) characterisation, sinotopia presents the potential future landscapes of China; those visions, however, all show the country unable to disentangle absurdities produced by different dimensions of state control, utopian discourses, and ecological devastation brought about by the hectic development. Sinotopia forms yet another kind of "different place (topia)" – heterotopia, a term often used both to analyse Han Song's (Song, 2023) and Cao Fei's works (Berry, 2015; Larson, 2020).

In his novel *Neuromancer*, William Gibson describes cyberspace as a "consensual hallucination" and "a graphic representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system" (Gibson, 1984). The phrase has since become a key metaphor for both virtual reality (VR) and cyberspace. Similarly, Clemens observes that Cao Fei "thereby announces herself as a documenter of collective hallucinations" (Clemens, 2011: 120–121). Read together, these perspectives highlight a continuity in conceiving digital spaces as shared, hallucinatory experiences. Byzantine structures in Han Song's narratives point towards the disintegration of meaning; unfolding levels of the hospital world also seem hallucinatory beyond comprehension.

Chinese science fiction and speculative works of art are noted for their potential to explain some of the contradictions of the social reality in the PRC. While science fiction indicates a wide, yet rather specific genre, the category of speculative works of art requires further clarification. Following the characterisation provided by Oziewicz (2017), speculative works of fiction are narratives that deliberately depart from "consensus reality." To do so, they use non-mimetic, imaginative elements to explore alternative

worlds or futures to contemplate on philosophical, social, and cultural questions (Oziewicz, 2017).

Reading authors such as Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, Han Song, Chen Qiufan, Hao Jingfang 郝景芳, and dozens of others through the lens of the country's present and future challenges has become a well-established direction for academic research (e.g. Callahan, 2023; Schneider-Vielsäcker, 2022; Sonal, 2019). Among many possible reasons for that, let's point out just two. First, Chinese science fiction has moved "from a largely unseen genre to being a darling of state and private enterprise" (Isaacson, 2021). Sonal (2019) makes a general statement about the genre's inclination: "a central motif of Chinese science fiction in the twenty-first century has been the rejuvenation and the ultimate triumph of Chinese culture and establishment of China as the sole superpower in the world." Thus, Chinese speculative fiction, while attracting more and more readers worldwide, is also steadily assuming a more prominent position within the country's cultural mainstream. Secondly, Chinese speculative works of art, in a sense, share a common ground with the political and media apparatus of the state, since they all construct narratives of China's development. They project the so-called sociotechnical imaginary, defined as "collectively held, institutionally stabilised and publicly performed visions of desirable futures" (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015: 12). There is, however, one significant difference: there is definitely more ambivalence to the future envisaged, as compared to the specific plans set out by the Chinese state. The use of this imaginary leads to an increase in the state's powers. While in mainstream projections, such as those about the China Dream, the all-powerful state is often portrayed as benevolent, in science-fiction (sci-fi) narratives, further technological enhancements frequently lead to a China that is more self-centred and coercive (Song, 2023). Song Mingwei has popularised labelling contemporary Chinese sci-fi literature the "new wave," turning it into a commonly recognised framework (see, e.g. Judy, 2022; Swift, 2025). The new wave started in the late 1980s, and its experimentation within the genre and balancing between popular and niche encouraged Song to define it as a novel and destabilising force in China's literary world. Song also outlines the poetics of new wave, which faces the unknown and invisible (Isaacson et al., 2024). This characterisation stems from another influential work by this scholar – "The Fear of Seeing," where Song unpacks new waves' anxieties of both epistemological and political nature (Song, 2023). These tropes inform our reading of Han Song's work, where increasing control over individuals provided by technological breakthroughs makes human lives only more miserable. Similarly, in Cao Fei's works, the technological world of the future is not any happier than the present reality.

For the use of our analysis, we want to recalibrate the notion of pessoptimism in China studies first put forward by Callahan (2010):

To put it simply, China is a pessoptimist nation. To understand China's glowing optimism, we need to understand its enduring pessimism, and vice versa. To understand China's dreams, we also need to understand its nightmares. China's national aesthetic entails the combination of a superiority complex, and an inferiority complex (Callahan, 2010: 9).

Callahan offers such a dialectical solution to look at the apparently contradictory expressions of China's identity, which quite often take their roots in the country's trauma of the "century of humiliation" (百年国耻, *bainian guochi*). While another object of Callahan's analysis through the lens of pessoptimism is the identity/security dynamics, we want to test the flexibility of the term and explore whether it could provide useful theoretical frameworks for reading the artistic imagery of China's future(s). We consider this exploration justified, given that both in *Hospital* and *Nova*, the country's past and foreign actors (US, widely defined West, USSR) "haunt" the narrative. Callahan (2023) himself provides a precedent by briefly interpreting a set of sci-fi literary works employing the notions of pessoptimism, neo-socialism, and *tianxia* (天下).

Both Han Song's prose and Cao Fei's art resist a single, ex cathedra reading; therefore, our focus on elements in these works which depict society and science by no means excludes other interpretations. We read both *Hospital* and *Nova* as counter-narratives that complicate the official discourse on the future of China. Their key feature that earns them the "counter" prefix is questioning the premise of technological determinism, which assumes that specific technological developments, provided that those are possible to achieve, will lead to desired social changes. Following Callahan's (2023) idea to examine Chinese science fiction works as a means to "think beyond the current global agenda," we analyse the two works to dissect the imagined facets of relationships between humans and technology, between science and politics, and between political communities. Science and technology are seen as drivers of national dreams: China Dream, modernisation, development, but they also help to keep people's minds contained – they can dream only the collective dream.

We deliberately include terms such as "works of art" and "art" that suggest a scope that is wider than the already vast body of literature. Juxtaposing a science fiction novel with a feature-length movie from a multimedia artist points to broader interest among Chinese cultural creators in imagining China in futuristic settings.

Our reading includes post-human dimensions of both works. We understand post-humanism here to a lesser degree as exploring the future stages of human development, but rather as presenting a dark view of "post-human" as "less-than-human." The perfect, ultra-rationality and science-oriented governance deprives humans of subjectivity and agency. Even if these two features have been conceptualised by post-human theory as not exclusive to humans, the ideological tenets envisioned in *Hospital* and *Nova* produce exploitative dystopias. In *Hospital*, the foundational premises are driven by transhumanist desires to enhance the human bodily condition. In *Nova*, a quest for digital transformation of humans leads to a personal tragedy, and the race for progress leaves common citizens stranded.

In our reading of *Hospital*, we consider both the original published in 2016 and the English translation by Michael Berry from 2023 as a point of reference. As explained by Berry in the novel's afterword, the version of the text that eventually came to life in English is more in line with Han Song's original intention. All the quotes from *Hospital* come from this translation; whenever the number of chapters is noted, they refer to Berry's translation. Other translated parts, such as quotes from Chinese-language academic research, are by the authors of this article.

Literature Review

Even though Han Song's body of prose is not an easy read, and some of his works receive mixed reviews, in recent years, his label-defying writing has inspired diverse scholarly perspectives. *Hospital* (Han, 2016) is the "opening act" of the "hospital trilogy," which also includes *Exorcism* (驱魔, *Qumo*, Han, 2017) and *Dead Souls* (亡灵, *Wangling*, Han, 2018), and so some of the academic commentary refers to the whole series. The already-mentioned Song Mingwei offers an analysis of *Hospital* as a subversive Foucauldian heterotopia (2021) and as sinotopia (2023). David Der-wei Wang offers a similar reading of liminal and transitory spaces (2020). Aloisio (2023), despite a rather scarce focus on the *Hospital*, provides a very insightful analysis of heterotopia as Han Song's strategy to counter official modernisation discourses. Lyu (2023) frames the *Hospital* trilogy in terms of necrofuturism, which hints at death as the production of biodata rather than anything else. Chen (2024) interprets the constantly changing chaotic stream of information within the hospital world through the notion of chaosmology, which informs Han Song's creative process.

Naturally, the work has also attracted scholarly attention in Chinese-language articles. Lai Peixuan 赖佩喧 links Han's "disease discourse" with Lu Xun's critique of China, who also framed the country's predicaments with health-related metaphors (Lai, 2021); this conceptual affinity has been noted, but perhaps less exposed by Song Mingwei (2021). Another Lu Xun's image – that of "iron house" symbolising social entrapment, is invoked by Liu Yanggang 刘阳扬. Apart from that, Liu recalls Donna Haraway's figure of cyborgs (1985) as trans-gender agents, concluding that in Han Song's novel, the redefinition of human into post-human only further enforces oppressive and hierarchical order (Liu, 2021). Liu Weiyun, on the other hand, focuses on the labyrinthine structure of the narrative, which underlies the contradictions of the novel's shifting realities (Liu, 2023).

Cao Fei, as an important figure in Chinese contemporary art, has attracted the attention of journalists, curators and researchers both from China and abroad. Early publications devoted to the analysis of her artistic activity date back almost twenty years, with an article by Maya Kovskaya (2006) and an interview by Joni Low (2006). The second decade of the century marks a significant increase in publications, with important papers devoted to Cao Fei, such as Silvia Fok (2011), Hou Hanru 侯瀚如 (2013), or Chris Berry (2015), appearing on a yearly basis. As Cao Fei's oeuvre is strongly heterogeneous, different studies focus on different stages of her activity, covering a wide array of topics. Her 2006/2007 Foshan Osram factory site-specific work, *Whose Utopia?*, which earned her international attention, forms the topic of earlier analyses. Video and VR works (especially the 2007–2011 project *RMB City* and the 2007 film *I.Mirror*) are discussed by Alice Ming Wai Jim (2012), Justin Clemens (2011), and Monica Merlin (2018). An in-depth look into her Hong Kong site-specific work, *Same Old, Brand New*, is provided by Jori Snels (2018). Angie Chau (2017) looks at three of her works (*I.Mirror*, *Haze and Fog*, and *La Town*) through the prism of "post-human consciousness," exploring topics of emotional disengagement, trauma and surveillance.

Giorgio Strafella and Daria Berg (2023) take on the topic of ruins in Chinese literature and visual arts, analysing Cao's *Rumba II: Nomad* (2015). In their 2024 publication, the two researchers chose Cao Fei as one of three examples of female cultural entrepreneurs operating in China (Berg and Strafella, 2024). A similar, although highly critical, look at Cao Fei from the perspective of her public activity is offered by Johannes Hoeming (2022). In turn, Astrid N. Korporaal (2024) compares Cao Fei and a Colombian artist, Ana Maria Millan, in the framework of post-colonial studies.

Cao's *HX Project*, which forms the topic of this paper, has also received considerable interest from researchers. Probably the most in-depth analysis of this project is offered by Ellen Larson in her two papers from 2020 and 2024. Other, albeit much briefer studies are authored by Chris Berry (2020), Kate Wong (2020), and Chinese researchers: Yang Chenhao 杨晨颢 (2023), Li Zhuoxuan 李卓璇 (2022), and Jin Mu 今木 (2021). An interesting look at the *HX Project* from the perspective of Sino-futurism is given by Zhao Xinyang and Michael Keane (2025) in their analysis of Cao's *Blueprints* exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London (2020). Numerous additional perspectives on the *HX Project* are offered in Cao Fei's recent media appearances and video materials produced in conjunction with international exhibitions where works from the project are shown, such as the interview with Daven Wu for *Wallpaper* (2021).

Han Song – the Author

Han Song, after over three decades of literary presence, remains one of the most prolific Chinese sci-fi authors, even though some of his works have never been published in China. He started writing fiction in 1988 (although some pinpoint his juvenile short stories, see Chen 2024); his first story, *Tombs of the Universe* (宇宙墓碑, *Yuzhou Mubei*) was officially published in China in 1992, making it a foundational text of the new wave. Around this time, Han became a journalist at the Xinhua News Agency, which probably explains the versatility of his writing output. The formative character of his writing earned him, along with Wang Jinkang 王晋康 and the most mainstream Liu Cixin, the name of one of the Three Marshals (三巨头, *San Jutou*). Compared to Liu Cixin, often branded as a representative of “hard” sci-fi – one inspired heavily by up-to-date scientific and technological knowledge, Han Song is more interested in logical incoherences and disfamiliarities that humans experience in the future controlled by soulless rationality. The list of authors that Han Song is usually compared with includes Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, Philip K. Dick, Franz Kafka, and Lu Xun. The writing strategy of Han Song may inform the sets of dichotomies that appear in *Hospital*: “because the world that sci-fi writers show is not real, it has to be written as realistically as possible” (Xu, 2016).

Hospital – the Synopsis

Han narrates his trilogy as a teleological schema of civilisational progress, moving from the “medicine era” (药时代, *yaoshidai*) through the “medicine war” (药战争,

yaozhazheng) towards a “medicine empire” (药帝国, *yaodiguo*). In the trilogy’s first volume, which is the focus of our analysis, the medical facility is not merely a setting, but an extrapolated feature of the grotesque world governed by medical ideology supported by astonishingly advanced big-data analysis. Medical ideology is the dominant dimension of narrating human and social life along the lines that every single life is merely a container of diseases that require treatment and administration. All ideological tenets are non-sensical, contradictory, and their punchy dialectics are somewhat similar to quotations from the Little Red Book: “to be without illness is to be ill,” “everyone is sick,” or “all illnesses are untreatable” (chapter 27).

Yang Wei 杨伟 – a government worker, an everyman kind of a protagonist – arrives in C City to compose a corporate song. The location remains partly undefined, although “C” may stand both for China and “Cosmos” – a simulacrum of the universe. In Han’s other novel – *Subway*, the first letters used in the same manner have darker implications (Ni, 2020). During the first evening of his stay, Yang Wei drinks a bottle of water, which causes unbearable stomach pain. Surprisingly, the hotel staff knew of the situation beforehand and transported him to a hospital. Yang is being endlessly subjected to various medical procedures, with complete disregard for the costs and for his own feelings. On a different level, another journey is happening – Yang Wei learns that the world has entered the Age of Medicine. In this new ideological era, everyone is being constantly diagnosed and, at the same time, everyone wishes to be taken care of by hospitals. Yang investigates the system’s *modus operandi*. Females that Yang happens to meet on his path discreetly contest the unchecked power of the institution and doctors. Those encounters slowly take root. He starts to hear a voice that calls itself a “possessor” (附体, *futi*), who (or which) convinces Yang to run away. He finally manages to get free and finds himself on a boat, only to discover that it is the Hospital Boat.

The novel, due to some scenes, may be considered disturbing: it includes depictions of murder, incest, rape, and repugnant descriptions of body fluids, all wrapped in a multi-layered blend of satire, horror, and speculative futurism heavily influenced by Buddhist thought. The Buddhist framework present throughout the whole trilogy underlines the elusive nature of all perceivable reality. Han Song’s strong preoccupation with Buddhism extends beyond *Hospital*, but its key points – depiction of endless wandering, or *samsara* (Lien, 2024), and conviction that “all is emptiness” (Jia, 2013) – feel almost palpable in the novel analysed here.

Cao Fei – the Artist

Cao Fei (b. 1978 in Guangzhou) is one of the most internationally recognised and highly acclaimed Chinese female artists. She graduated from the Guangzhou Fine Arts Academy in 2001, and the first public presentations of her video art took place while she was still a student in 1998 and 1999. She works in mixed media (video, installations, VR, performance, and photography), and her most well-known earlier works include *Cosplay* (video, 2004), *Whose Utopia?* (video, 2006–2007), *RMB City* (Second Life virtual world art project and machinima *I. Mirror* video, 2007–2011), *Haze and Fog* (video, 2013), and

La Town (diorama animation video, 2014). Her artworks have been presented widely in China and abroad, including the Venice Biennale (2007, 2015), Tate Modern in London (2013), Centre Pompidou in Paris (2014, 2019), MoMA PS1 in New York (2016), Guggenheim Museum in New York (2018), Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney (2024/2025), and dozens of other galleries, museums and biennales from New Zealand to Brazil, from Spain to Ukraine, and from India to South Korea.

Cao Fei's oeuvre shows the artist's keen interest in social topics, such as the consequences of China's economic transformation and urbanisation, the rapid social changes and social inequalities, or the mass consumption. She has been one of the earliest experimenters with new technology, especially virtual and augmented reality (*RMB City* project). In 2015, Cao Fei started her major *HX Project*, which engaged her for a full ten years, until 2024 (Larson, 2020, 2024; Wong, 2020). Named after a deserted cinema Hongxia (红霞) destined for demolition in the Jiuxianqiao district in Beijing where she moved her studio, the project comprised a wide array of actions and outcomes: research into the 1950s Chinese scientific and industrialisation policies (especially the history of the electronic industry), research into the history of the 738 and 774 factory units where Hongxia Theatre was located, city archaeology and artefact collection, site-specific artworks, installations, video art, finally the documentation of the Hongxia Theatre premises and their demolition by the city authorities in 2024. The full-feature sci-fi film *Nova* (新星, *Xin xing*), completed in 2019, comprises *HX Project's* most important outcome (Li, 2022: 122).

Nova – the Film

Nova, in the words of Daven Wu, can be aptly summarised as a “retro-futurist tale of a failed secret science project that attempts to turn humans into digital mediums” (Wu, 2021). It is a heterotopian sci-fi film with action set somewhere between the 1950s and 1960s and the future, which explores the history of the Unit 738 area, the history of China's technological development and scientific cooperation with the USSR, as well as issues of China's present social and technological development. Mao-era associations and hints of Mao-era trauma form an important inner layer of the story (Berry, 2020: 42).

The film's main character is a talented Chinese scientist leading a team of researchers taught by Soviet comrades to construct a time/space relocation machine in a secret lab. Coincidentally, his primary USSR counterpart responsible for the knowledge transfer is an attractive, young woman, and the two fall in love. With the Sino–Soviet split of 1959/1960, the Soviet delegation leaves the lab abruptly, and the Chinese scientist is left to complete the task by himself. He raises his son Li Xia (the plot leaves it unsaid whether the Soviet scientist is the mother, Kate Wong believes she is; see Wong, 2020: 45), and devotes everything to science, so much so that, at one point, when Li Xia is around ten years old, he is put in the time/space machine and “digitalised.” The experiment fails, and the father loses his son forever, but Li Xia is not dead. He is suspended in between times and spaces, able to observe his father at different stages of his life, meeting various “ghosts” of the past and the future, constantly attempting to

return to reality but failing to do so. Li Xia's futile struggle to reconnect with his father and utter loneliness form significant emotional tropes of the film (Yang, 2023: 162).

Nova was filmed mostly in the Hongxia Theater building and its proximity (Larson, 2024: 71). Some of the objects present in the film are exhibited in the gallery space where the film is typically shown, exhibition staff wear branded, blue laboratory working clothes from the film, and some of the film's characters are also present in other Cao Fei works exhibited together with *Nova* (e.g. the *Matryoshka* series photographs and video). This creates an interesting intertextual effect, which only broadens the feeling of heterotopia and the immersion of the film's viewers in *HX Project's* constructed universe.

Nova's debut was in 2019 at Cao Fei's *HX* Exhibition at Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the film has been screened since then at numerous solo exhibitions of the artist in China and around the world, most recently as part of the *Cao Fei: Tidal Flux* Exhibition at the Museum of Art Pudong in Shanghai, and the *Cao Fei: My City is Yours* Exhibition at Sydney's Art Gallery of North South Wales, both exhibitions in 2024/2025.

Thematic Analysis

The above theoretical framework and introductory remarks of the authors and their works inform our thematic analysis of *Hospital* and *Nova* that revolves around four topics that link the two works, and that may be read as an expression of anxieties over China's future:

- The relationship between the past and the future, China and the outside world.
- Personal dimension of the quest for scientific progress.
- Technological successes of the state and the livelihood of the common folk.
- The view of future society: personal freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

The Relationship Between the Past and the Future, China and the Outside World

The visions of the future presented in *Hospital* and *Nova* are firmly rooted in China's past. Both Han Song and Cao Fei choose to include in their constructs two elements of modern history of the country which blur the clarity of China's modern success story: traumas of tragic events of the Mao era, and the connection of China's progress with the outside world – the collective West (*Hospital*), and the USSR (*Nova*).

No matter “how far” or even “how likely” the future is depicted in Han Song's *Hospital*, it is certainly an era in which the spectres of contemporary Chinese politics are very much present. When decoding the continuity of time in *Hospital*, one could recall the notion of “ruinated futurity” proposed by Lin Shiqi (2023). Lin used the term to shed light on repressed memory revealed in the works of contemporary Dongbei writers, Shuang Xuetao and Ban Yu. According to Lin, “ruinated futurity

serves as a framework for conceptualising futurity as the reworking – rather than closure – of the repressed past” (Lin, 2023). The language of Mao-era voluntarism, that is, “we conquer disease and serve the people,” intertwines with Xi Jinping’s teleology – the Age of Medicine is taking place as “a great change not seen in a million years.” Treating patients is a “protracted war” – a term known in China as Mao’s dictum of how to fight the war of resistance against Japan. Yang Wei receives an “endless series of treatments,” which puts him in a position of being constantly suspected of being sick. The everyman protagonist requires a continued correction by the state. Han Song’s hospital world brings back to life the spectre of totalitarianism and shows a circular rather than linear rhythm of history; the mechanics of politics remain the same despite the ultra-rationalised, hyper-scientific setting of the future.

Much of the futuristic world created by Cao Fei in *Nova* is reminiscent of Maoist China. As Chris Berry rightly observes:

The setting of *Nova* itself mixes futuristic and nostalgic registers. The buildings and street scenes are those associated with Chinese towns of fifty or more years ago. People cycle between the five-story walk-up apartment blocks typical of the Mao era rather than driving cars by the glass-and-steel skyscrapers of contemporary Chinese cities. However, other elements seem to come from an imagined future (Berry, 2020: 42).

This mixture of past and future in *Nova* is both unsettling in its nightmarish, dystopian character and nostalgic at the same time. Ellen Larson, writing about Cao Fei’s earlier *HX Project* video *Asia One*, calls it “proleptic nostalgia” and explains the term as: “a nostalgia for the past, though from the viewer’s contemporary position, a future utopian nostalgia for the present” (Larson, 2020: 274). However, Cao Fei does not idealise the past. Li Xia, in his travels through time and space, meets a very unlikely companion, like him, locked in the dimension of the constant “in-between.” It is a teenage girl, scarred and half-blinded, with a shaved head and wearing a dirty, Mao-era padded jacket. She “plays” a capitalist during the Cultural Revolution struggle sessions, where she is regularly berated and beaten up. Lonely and fatalistic as Li Xia, she is almost the only person (or rather ghost) that the digitalised son of the scientist can meet and converse with during his unending odyssey. She seems to represent China’s troubled past, which is still very much present somewhere in the background of the optimistic, futuristic visions of progress and happiness.

The starting point of China’s modernity and progress is inseparable from the country’s relations with the outside world – the collective West and the USSR. The world in *Hospital* is in a state of constant conflict – ideological confrontation replaces economic cooperation, and the network of hospitals is the effect of germ warfare and tit-for-tat deliberate worsening of environmental conditions. There is a historical narrative of Westerners laying the foundation for medicine as it is performed in the hospitals, yet it is China that made the “glorious strides” in the field. Also, any good intentions on either side are portrayed as insincere: Westerners could not have possibly built hospitals in China out of kindness, while the Chinese keep the portraits of Western doctors on the

walls just to feign friendship, so that they can further exploit foreign technology and know-how.

The USSR and the nostalgic story of Sino-Soviet brotherhood are very much present in *Nova* and in Cao Fei's other works related to the *HX Project*. *Nova* portrays the period of technological and scientific transfer from the USSR to China in the 1950s almost as a beautiful fairytale. In the film, the Soviets arrive as near-saviours, bringing with them all the modern equipment. They patiently teach their Chinese counterparts everything they know, spend time together dancing and drinking, and eventually, true love appears between the two main characters. It is clear that without the USSR, there would be no scientific and technological progress in China. And yet Cao Fei's film is, at the same time, sarcastic in this portrayal. The two Soviet gentlemen accompanying the female scientist seem to parody stereotypical Russians in their vodka drinking, dance and nostalgic campfire singing. The progress that the Soviets bring to China benefits only the secret lab program – there is a clear goal set – constructing a digitalising machine, the HX103, which could transfer humans to another dimension, most probably with a military purpose in mind, as part of the Cold War rivalry. Cao Fei adds a clear, humorous element to this plot – the Chinese scientists constructing the machine experiment on turtles (tuning to humans only later), and in the “future” part of the film, we learn that the turtles were eventually successfully sent to Mars, strolling on the planet's surface. In a dusty, dilapidated interior, a television set shows a national television station news program describing the achievement with a characteristic, over-enthusiastic commentary of the anchorman, well-known to all viewers of Chinese television. This is a clear ironic take on the Chinese space program, so much a part of the China Dream and the shared national vision of the Chinese future.

In Cao Fei's *Nova*, Chinese scientists successfully build on the initial Soviet assistance, quickly gaining self-sufficiency, ultimately outperforming other leading nations with their grand achievement of the turtle Mars-walk. Cao Fei offers us a vision of China's future, which in a way seems to be a reiteration of the Mao era past, with mass mobilisation and personal sacrifices for the national struggle to catch up and overtake the capitalist West. The ideological connection between the Mao era and the present-day Chinese progress is well reflected in the contemporary culture of the PRC. As Jessica Imbach rightly points out: “Maoist visions of fast-paced economic development, the automation of labour and the complete industrialisation of the globe resonate with current articulations of Chinese futurism” (Imbach, 2021: 127).

The narrative of *Hospital* shies away from directly mentioning China, instead locating the developments in “our country” or “home country.” However, the novel's discourses on the realm of science and technology and, by extension, “our country's place in the world” echo the party-state's political speech. The hospitals “have their own characteristics,” which recalls the formula of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” In the novel, such wording serves to justify some of the institutional dysfunction while insisting on the system's uniqueness. The others follow the example of China, as “the latest trend in globalism.” Han Song projects the impulses of the Mao era mobilisation into the futuristic technoscientific order. Drawing on the dynamic of “ruined futurity” outlined by Lin Shiqi, one could say that the future is where the past returns.

Personal Dimension of the Quest for Scientific Progress

Both *Hospital* and *Nova* show the national quest for scientific progress in a distorted mirror of absurdities in the personal lives of the characters. Han Song and Cao Fei use different strategies, but both authors choose a somewhat fractious way of portraying the results of a nationwide fanatic drive towards making advances in science and technology.

Hospital is built upon contradictory dichotomies. Science is celebrated as the victory of the rational, yet it is fetishised to the point of the irrational. The ideological tenets of the Age of Medicine are contradictory, on the verge of sounding non-sensical: “to be without illness is to be ill” or “serious ailments are [...] like no ailments at all.”

The self-serving nature of the system becomes obvious when Yang Wei discovers that the hospital keeps genetic material, which enables cloning in case of patient shortages (chapter 39). The hyper-rationalised scientific discourse justifies population control, while the so-called medical punks work underground on even more advanced scientific breakthroughs – they logically assume that since life and the hospital are sources of all maladies, the strains of bacteria they are about to produce are going to end human life altogether. They continue destructive intellectual work while claiming their love for science along the way. The hospital workers offer lengthy elaborations of marriages, monogamy, and other social bonds being redundant remnants of a petty-bourgeois mindset. Leaving all those behind leads to carving a new human – one that is genetically rebooted and unattached. As a result, Yang Wei, lacking any moral compass, fantasises about incest, and later considers that “a part of a treatment” (chapter 48).

In the case of Yang Wei 杨伟, the pursuit of progress absorbs his health autonomy. As noted by David Der-wei Wang (2020), the protagonist’s name is a homonym for impotence (阳痿, *yang wei*). If we consider Yang Wei as a kind of an everyman protagonist, his inability to act points towards the wider scope of population disempowerment. In Han’s dystopia, the individual body is the space where the scientific drive for progress unfolds. Fixation with disease is extrapolated to the whole universe: “In order to stave off its pain, the universe has evolved into a hospital” (chapter 71). Therefore, treatment becomes the most fundamental dynamic of all beings. This monstrous ontological image brings to mind not only explorations of outer space – one of the areas China aspires to lead in – but also Mao’s vision of permanent revolution taking place also in space and in post-human phases of history (Rogacz, 2024).

Scientific advancement in *Nova* is a tale of personal sacrifice, embodied principally by the main character – the Chinese scientist. His sacrifices start with parting with his loved one, as the Soviet team packs their bags and heads back to the USSR, leaving him with the unfinished secret project. As expected of a communist patriot, his priorities are set correctly: he chooses science over personal happiness and stays in the lab to complete the assignment of high national importance. His second sacrifice comes when he decides to lock his only son in the relocation machine to achieve his grand oeuvre. He spends the rest of his life alone. The state recognises him with medals, which he proudly sports on his chest in old age. But his loneliness and remorse over giving his son to science haunt him until the last minutes of his life.

And then comes the sacrifice of the son, Li Xia. He seems to be accepting his fate, and rather than having a grudge against the cruel father, shows all signs of understanding his choices – national goals are so much more important than the lives of individuals. Both father and son lead destitute lives and long for personal contact, yet both know that their longing is of secondary importance; it is a personal price that they must pay in the name of progress and fulfilment of national goals. As Yang Chenhao (2023: 163) writes: “In these Cao Fei’s works, there is a strong future orientation, yet the reality that follows tears people away from their yearning for an unstrained and happy life.”

Technological Successes of the State and the Livelihood of the Common Folk

The promise of the state to bring about common prosperity and class equality through technological and scientific progress does not seem to materialise in *Hospital* and *Nova*. The vision of the future in both works is one where the ordinary citizens face unrelenting hardships, inequality, and social isolation, while the state celebrates its technological breakthroughs.

Han Song’s novel paints an unsettling picture of individuals losing their agency within an overpowering system. The disintegration of the most basic social bonds – those based on love, family kinship, and a sense of community – is replaced by the relationship between patients and their doctors, and hospitals as a whole. This obedience is internalised by Yang Wei, who understands that “the fate of hospital and patients is connected” (chapter 14), and he’s being taken care of “for the long-term peace and prosperity of my country” (chapter 29). Such a degree of ideological engineering echoes the most fervent times of the Mao era; also, the economic gaps between rich and poor have been apparently (and officially) bridged. The discursive power and institutional grip do not necessarily lead to common prosperity, since people flock to hospitals, pushing them to their limits. Yang Wei, in the most chaotic developments of the novel, moves through rooms filled with body fluids and horrible stench. Technological superiority is not enough to eradicate the symptoms that would occur in a mismanaged high-socialist state: common bribery and people being unable to afford the treatment, even though it is mandatory. One could probably accept the explanation: “This is what happens when you have a large population that wants to live a good life but has a relatively low average income” (chapter 10), if not for the fact that the scope of advancement expands the conventional understanding of medicine, since some of the ailments are treated in outer space (chapter 26). The two dimensions – the hardships of *laobaixing* (老百姓, Chinese term for “the people” or “common people”) and the stunning capacities of hospitals – alternate throughout the novel, yet they seem to exist without influencing each other. That intuition is, however, false. In Han Song’s futuristic dystopia, exploitation is like old wine in new bottles. The inequalities of redistribution (or lack thereof) are being reproduced, coated with a different ideological vocabulary. This probably explains why the fringe intellectuals of the hospital world – medical punks (医药朋克,

yiyaopengke) “believe that the best hospital is no hospital” (chapter 42); it is a dream of health (and wealth) without institutional governance.

The world created by Cao Fei in *Nova* is built on the paradox of scientific advancement and backwardness. As already mentioned, the visual language of the film consistently mixes 1950s to 1980s imagery with that of a sci-fi movie. Children sing in a 1950s-style school choir, but their mouths are lit from the inside by blue light-emitting diode (LED) light. People on the street dress in shabby clothes but wear futuristic, LED-lit sunglasses. They buy futuristic food from old-style street vendors’ stalls, etc. Li Xia wanders around the Hongxia Theatre building’s dilapidated interior, sifting through old paper files but also checking information on hologram displays projected on a mirror or in mid-air.

Future technology is everywhere, but it doesn’t seem to make lives any better. People shown on the streets of Nova town are poor and don’t look any happier than the poverty-stricken inhabitants of China in the pre-Deng era. The *Nova* world is polluted – there is dust everywhere, and Li Xia walks around the Hongxia Theatre interior in a facemask. Everything is dark and empty – the film-noir atmosphere and a theatre-like build-up of the film set create a feeling of hopelessness and desolation. Progress brings benefit to an abstract “state,” which achieves its consecutive, national successes, but the city folk are stuck in a reality of hardship, selling junk on the street or engaging in prostitution. There is no progress for Nova’s inhabitants, or rather, they do not benefit from it, neither in material nor in emotional aspects. Zhao and Keane write: “The celebration of technology is enfolded into the Chinese Dream. The techno-cultural imaginary thus evokes aspirations of national power and global influence” (Zhao and Keane, 2025: 225). The Chinese Dream in Cao Fei’s *Nova* remains in the realm of Li Xia’s father’s past scientific achievements and in newsreels seen on television. It is passively observed, but not shared by the common people.

The View of Future Society: Personal Freedom and the Pursuit of Happiness

Han Song and Cao Fei create visions of ambiguous futures which lack social cohesion – their works can be understood as proposing a critical response to the party’s efforts to build a harmonious society, in which citizens can pursue their personal fulfilment and happiness.

The society of the Medicine Era is absolutely atomised. It plays on the basic human instinct – everyone is a patient; therefore, everyone focuses on their own condition and, in a way, feels threatened. Families do not visit patients, since the very institution of family has been discarded; the only meaningful relationship now is between the patient and the doctor. More rebellious patients investigate whether doctors ever die, so a sectarian view of doctors persists, despite a policy that all doctors must undergo patient experience. Also, patients get the opportunity to become interns and, eventually, doctors – such is the promise, at least. That shows that the doctor’s role is political, and so

medical knowledge is of lesser importance, just like in Mao times, potentially anyone could become empowered within the system.

The tendency to centralise all social structures in *Hospital* is similar to the urge to “securitise” all spheres of governance in China (see, e.g. Drinhausen and Legarda, 2022). In C City, all facilities, such as hotels, are required by law to be directly connected to hospitals – everything for people’s health. It is not a police state per se, yet there is no running away from becoming an object of biopower and medicalisation, which the novel’s finale pointedly underlines.

Even in the midst of absurd and grotesque daily-life experiences, the hospital is consistently praised as a collective triumph, and the institutional pride is just another side of national glory. Medicine, as performed in *Hospital*, becomes elevated as the ultimate rationality, but it is simultaneously a self-referential system, fetishised and emptied of meaning. As noted by David Der-wei Wang, Han Song follows Lu Xun’s steps in his reflections over “the illusory line between disease and medicine” (2020).

Economical structures of the country depicted by Han Song are “same but not one” – impossible and entirely shifted towards medical services, yet still unable to provide health-care for everyone in need. One of the often-quoted paragraphs from the novel lists all the medical facilities that are the afterlives of transnational corporations, such as “SONY TREATMENT CENTER, MICROSOFT EMERGENCY CENTER, GOOGLE COMMUNITY HOSPITAL, HUAWEI SPECIAL TREATMENT WARD” (chapter 26), etc. There is something deeply pessimistic about this trope: private capital of unmeasurable size joins forces with (seemingly) unlimited political power to work on the same goal, only to reproduce the same disparities that we witness in late capitalism.

The imagined society – if we can even speak of one – of *Hospital* replaces the pursuit of happiness with a never-ending chase for health. That frenzied race towards constant, data-based optimisation organises all other social structures, including transnational big-tech and economic entities. Reasoning disguised as rationality that serves to explain discarding all social bonds meets a completely irrational redistribution of all resources into healthcare-cum-surveillance.

The *universum* of the Nova city created by Cao Fei is no freer than C City in *Hospital*. Quite contrary to the harsh evaluation of the *HX Project* by Johannes Hoerning (see especially, Hoerning, 2022: 68), Cao Fei in her film does not avoid pointed critique of the state’s “monopoly on symbolic violence” (Hoerning, 2022: 71). There are several, very explicit flashes of the power of the police state in Nova city. A long-haired vagabond with whom Li Xia manages to converse, sitting on a street curb, is chased and captured by some security personnel. There is a blurred shot of “dissidents” led in a line by the same security personnel in a tunnel, with each supposed criminal wearing a band on his arm with an English label “BUG” on it. Li Xia’s father also progresses in his experiments from turtles to humans, putting “BUGS” in his relocation machine before he places his own son in it, too. Clearly, Nova City does have some undesired inhabitants who are being captured, led somewhere and eliminated or used as guinea pigs in Nova’s labs.

Nova City is empty, reminding one of an abandoned theatre setting. There is hardly anyone on the streets, and if people meet, they talk little. There doesn’t seem to be

much optimism and faith in a happy future among the city folk. With everything dark, deserted and covered in dust, it is evident that apart from some hi-tech gadgets, the China Dream in *Nova* has brought neither happiness nor direct benefit to these people.

Li Xia wanders the streets and the empty interiors almost like a diver exploring a shipwreck, or an archaeologist trying to find traces of the past. Although he can travel between times and dimensions, Li Xia is clearly focused on the past: his own childhood and the life of his father. He desperately hopes to reunite with his father and come back to his original here and now. This is his private pursuit of happiness, which seems very much anti-scientific and anti-progress. As Jin Mu (2021: 95) writes: "Time travellers in literary and artistic works seemingly seek out unknown worlds, but their true driving force is often emotions lost in the past."

Nova City is not a place of happiness and personal achievement. It is a sad and history-scarred surrounding in which common people lead their impoverished and quiet existence under the control of the state. The future and the past mingle, progress and backwardness co-exist side by side. The state boasts of its technological successes and keeps order using its instruments of coercion. Li Xia is locked in his digital dimension, but others are not free either. Cao Fei in *Nova* creates a dystopian view of the future in which personal achievement is impossible, and in which the society is broken and atomised.

Conclusion

We analyse the two works across four dimensions of the relationship between past and future, and that of China and the outside world; the personal consequences of the quest for scientific progress; the disconnect between state-level technological success and the livelihood of ordinary citizens; and the concept of personal freedom and happiness in the societies of the future.

The analysis reveals that both authors identify numerous dangers associated with the bright visions of the future of scientific and technological advancement, as envisaged in the official party discourse. These dangers include the loss of individual agency, the necessity for personal sacrifices, the loss of personal space, and the atomisation of society. State-led progress leaves common citizens impoverished, without addressing their problems and needs. By offering counter-narratives to the state's "sociotechnical imaginary," Han Song and Cao Fei provide a more nuanced and ambivalent vision of China's future, one rooted in the contradictions and anxieties of its present.

While Cao Fei's depiction of the Nova city is firmly rooted in China's contemporary history and the present, for Han Song, however, China is merely one of the settings, one that he never mentions directly. The writer follows the threads that he unfolded in his previous works. Just like in *Subway*, "Han Song shows a sceptical attitude towards the grand narratives of extreme techno-optimism" (Ni, 2020). His biopolitical vision can be read as a speculation on the "fixation of future," that is, what story is going to justify our enslavement on a global scale. That resonates with the writer's intuition that the world might be, slowly but surely, turning into a sinotopia.

Both *Hospital* and *Nova* are open to many interpretations. In our reading, they show the double-edged potential of a progress-driven political power: that of bringing scientific and technological advancement, and that of unsettling social bonds and eroding what's human to sustain the continuity of authority.


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Not all happy: Voices of social critique in contemporary culture

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the European Union

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Not all happy: Voices of social critique in contemporary Chinese culture

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Piotr Machajek, František Reismüller*

SWPS University



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Key findings

- Despite tight censorship and ubiquitous practice of self-censorship, there is still space in the Chinese cultural sector for social critique, and there are still artists and writers who decide to tackle important social issues in their works.
- Artists and writers employ various techniques and strategies to voice social critique and avoid negative consequences. These techniques include indirect communication (through the extended use of metaphors, allegories and allusions), using silence and emptiness to convey meaning, focusing on topics which seem non-representative of China as a whole, adorning their critique with didactic postscripts, choosing the genre of comedy to communicate social critique.
- Chinese artists explore topics of social interest falling into three main categories: social and interpersonal dynamics (marriage, parenting, parent-child relations, relations among social peers); economic and structural pressures (environmental concerns, human cost of China's economic rise, critique of neoliberalism and consumerism, corruption and abuse of power, dilemmas of technological advancement); personal identity and well-being (feminist topics, disillusionment, loneliness, personal traumas).
- Social topics undertaken by Chinese artists and writers show both local specificity (e.g. concerns with corruption and the abuse of power), and global embedding (e.g. environmental concerns, critique of neoliberalism and capitalism).
- Our research shows a society tired with ruthless economic growth, families affected by financial pressures and internal generational conflicts, and young people no longer believing that personal happiness is a reachable goal. Chinese society seems to be at a turning point - leaving the era of hectic economic development and facing new challenges of life in an economically disappointing, tech-enhanced authoritarian state.

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Introduction

We are facing increasing challenges in conducting research on contemporary Chinese society: diminishing access to reliable data and fieldwork permissions, distrust among the interlocutors anxious about unwanted consequences, ideological mobilisation and nationalistic feelings preventing the more critical viewpoints. With a tight censorship system and effective self-censorship, there is less and less content available for evaluation by researchers wishing to understand the problems and challenges that members of the society identify as important in today's China.

The field of arts and literature offers an alternative space for research, one that is still relatively accessible and rich in versatile content.

If direct study of society proves difficult, culture gives an indirect, reflected look at social issues as seen, digested and communicated by the artists and writers to their audiences. This research approach is in no way unique - there is a recent precedent to treating cultural texts as indicators of pivotal socio-political developments. From 2017 to 2019, the German Federal Ministry of Defence funded the Cassandra Project, which aimed at predicting potential civil strife in the Balkans, Algeria, and Azerbaijan through analysis of literary works (Greenfield 2021).

Not all creators are interested in social issues. In fact, in today's China it takes courage, not necessarily a political one, but more and more often also financial to discuss them, and most of those working in the cultural sector prefer to steer away from all trouble. Abstract and public art, novels and TV series about imperial China or Hollywood-type commercial film productions are a way to earn a living without treading on the invisible red lines of what is permitted and what is not seen favourably by the censors. And yet a review of several hundred works of literature, theatre, film and visual arts of the Xi Jinping era spanning the years 2012-2024 conducted for this study shows that topics of social interest are present and that their recurring patterns provide valuable insight into contemporary Chinese society.

Topic mapping

Our research identified a large corpus of artistic and literary works of interest from the last decade, dealing with social issues. Almost a hundred of them were selected for close examination. This revealed a list of recurrent topics which can be grouped into the following topic clusters:

<u>Social and Interpersonal Dynamics</u>	<u>Economic and Structural Pressures</u>	<u>Personal Identity and Well-Being</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Generational and Familial Conflicts ● Domestic Violence and Family Issues ● Social Marginalisation and Class Disparities ● Societal Expectations and Materialism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Urban-Rural Divide ● Healthcare and Social Welfare ● Environmental Concerns and Rural Destruction ● Technological Advancement and Its Impact ● State Control and Censorship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gender Inequality and Feminism ● Youthful Disillusionment and Aimlessness ● Mental Health, Alienation and Trauma

These topics reflect some of the interests of artists and writers working in China now, who in their works focus principally on social issues. **The topic list above is by no means exhaustive, and neither is it free from bias on the side of the researchers.** Some topics and concerns intersect and reappear in different sections. For example, China's youths' prospects are portrayed both as a country-specific social dilemma and as part of wider global issues. Despite these restrictions, however, the topic mapping proposed here goes one step further towards understanding what is deemed important in the social discourse of today's China.

Social and Interpersonal Dynamics

Across various media—be it film, theatre, literature, or visual arts—Chinese artists are uncovering and challenging the intricate layers of family relationships, generational divides, and disillusionment felt by both young and old. One of these perspectives is **parent-child relations**, specifically the generational divides and the examination of family bonds. Numerous works, particularly films, focus on themes of generational clash, or alienation within the family. The topic of parental care and family duty is also explored in works by young visual artists. In theatre **there are topics of family strains, broken families (including “left behind” children), or high expectations of mothers towards their daughters.** Another significant issue examined in theatre is the hardship of **parenting under difficult economic conditions.** This includes the struggles faced by female migrant workers, who are often too exhausted to fight

for their maternity rights. The common denominator for these productions is the interest in showing the hardships of ordinary lives, and how upbringing conditions and economic challenges shape and influence relations within families. This interest can be viewed as a continuation of the long-term focus of Chinese artists on the lives of the underprivileged: rural inhabitants, migrant workers, single parents, and people in health crises.

Themes of **marriage and marital relations** are also tackled, particularly in the works of contemporary female writers and dramatists, who examine the societal expectations and disillusionment within marriages. Marital fatigue, inequality, and emotional coldness are subjects of theatrical works. Films confront the challenges of marriage, family reputation, and domestic violence, presenting the struggles of women within constricting social systems. These works also closely touch upon the topics of gender inequality and feminism.

Relations with classmates and social peers form another interesting theme, with works often reflecting the pressure and competition embedded in early life, bullying on campus, a lack of security embedded in the family environment, or a feeling of detachment.

Economic and Structural Pressures

Environmental concerns have been the focus of visual artists ever since China embarked on the rapid road of development at all costs. Pollution and waste became a central theme for works by numerous artists, who produced objects from discarded materials or showed environmental destruction and high levels of pollution through art. Visual artists have consistently worked throughout the last twenty years to show the critical problem of pollution, and the **costs of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation**.

The human costs of China's economic rise are shown from an insider's perspective in a new phenomenon of "low-stratum literature" (*diceng wenxue*). These are works written by rural migrants and other physical labourers who often focus on **the struggle of millions of Chinese** in search of upward social mobility. These poets and writers witness, experience, and translate into poetry and literature the indignities faced by cleaners, nannies, couriers and other low-paid workers - a hot topic also in Chinese social media.

The stunning extent of urbanisation taking place in China produces a growing disparity between the city and the countryside. These socioeconomic developments bear dire consequences for individuals. Writers focus on such problems as **women trafficking** or rural society's increasing brutality and indifference.

Cinematography is a medium especially suited to providing realistic glimpses of "other lives". Some recent films reveal **desperate attempts at upward social mobility** by those on the fringes of the society. The characters are willing to undertake risky or unconventional paths, such as

smuggling electronic equipment or illegal drug testing, as their only way to change their economic situation.

Chinese theatre creators have shown interest in a **critical evaluation of neoliberalism**, as a global issue, but also a part of the Chinese economic model. They point out to spiritual emptiness, mechanical existence, and dehumanisation in a world ruled by money, as well as to the economy-driven gap between traditional and modern rural life. Some of the works combine critique of capitalist and neoliberal economics with a stern look at socialist and communist ideologies. They take on topics of repetitive and solitary office work, labour exploitation, and human alienation. There are others who search for an alternative path - a shift away from material wealth and **consumerism**, and toward the fulfilment found in small pleasures, challenging societal definitions of happiness and inviting a more introspective approach to life satisfaction.

Topics of **corruption, abuse of power or state control** on various levels of business or governmental organizations are also presented in Chinese films, most notably comedies. The specific areas of interest include real-estate fraud, exploitation in mining regions, intervention of the state in private lives, or such specific issues as the financial inaccessibility of cancer drugs caused by local corruption of business and legal circles. Some of the critique voiced in better-known films of nation-wide distribution ignite social discussion and even directly contribute to policy change.

Technological advancement is an important theme in most recent works in visual arts. The last few years since the Covid-19 pandemic have accelerated artists' interest in AI, both as a tool in the artistic workshop and a topic of analysis. In numerous experimental works done with the support or in partnership with AI authors pose questions on human-machine interaction, the nature of humanity and the place of humans in the world of the future.

Similar topics are undertaken in the fast-growing Chinese sci-fi literature. It is now one of the most popular cultural exports of the PRC, enjoying strong state support. This literature, unsurprisingly, dissects relations between humans and technology, also in the local context, showing the hopelessness of an individual posed against **omnipotent technology**. The dystopian, high-technology-driven future is also explored in theatre, in works depicting a future world where humans are fully instrumentalised or in works experimenting with stimulating human emotions with machine-learning.

Many of these issues are global in nature and as such they reshape lives on a level that goes far beyond the Chinese context.

Works by Chinese artists and writers show that many long-recognized social issues, such as environmental pollution, poverty or corruption are still valid topics of concern in the Chinese society of today. But there are new problems as well: ageing, the use of technological tools of control, and the unknown brought about by the advent of AI.

Personal Identity and Well-Being

The last four years since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic have put the individual in focus. The traumas of the incessant lockdowns, loneliness, and uncertainty have made their way into public narratives. Economic slowdown and the worsening of China's relations with the West have added fuel to feelings of anxiety and lack of hope. Chinese social media have been flooded with posts by youth who no longer believe in bright prospects for themselves. Terms such as "lying flat" (*tangping*), "letting it rot" (*bailan*), references to a delusional literary character Kong Yiji and "involution" (*neijuan*) have symbolised this loss of hope and the will to struggle. Another term, *run* due to its phonetic proximity to the English language 'run' (as in 'run away') became a keyword for all those young Chinese who feel that emigrating from the country is the only option.

The feeling of **disillusionment and hopelessness** resonates strongly in the works of young Chinese artists in visual arts and theatre. One of the more strikingly recurrent topics in contemporary stage productions is suicide. The issue is explored from the point of views of social alienation, social oppression-induced despair, and mental anguish.

Loneliness is the second topic clearly marked in works by young artists. Some show the feeling of isolation through hostile and towering city structures, others focus on the alienation and misunderstandings within peer groups or longing for a sibling in single-child families. Interestingly, artists have also made note of the anxieties of China's **ageing population**, such as the unease of elderly parents who witness the reversal of traditional family roles. This portrayal reflects the growing isolation that some older adults feel family relations evolve and shows the complex emotional currents that accompany these changes in contemporary Chinese society.

Art can also have a healing function. This process of **dealing with personal traumas** develops sometimes almost unintentionally during performances which open towards audience participation and experience sharing. Such projects uncover a strong need in Chinese society to work through personal traumas which are sometimes well hidden from family members and friends, but manifest themselves in a safe, welcoming space, among strangers.

Trauma transformed into feminist art is strongly present in theatre and in visual arts, with topics such as societal definitions of masculinity, the often-taboo discussions surrounding male sexuality, and the female body. The feminist approach is also introduced through drawing on historic examples of remarkable women: female physicists or previously unknown artists.

In the post-pandemic world, it is no way unique for Chinese artists to be focussing on personal traumas and to be tackling loneliness and alienation in their works. What makes the Chinese experience different, however, is the concurrence of these themes with that of the loss of hope and motivation caused by economic and political shifts.

Ways of voicing social critique

Many topics of social interest are politically charged and taking them on by artists and writers involves certain risks. The Chinese censorship system is effective in its unique flexibility and localisation. The rules are general and vague. It is up to the organiser of a performance (e.g. theatre festival), publisher (literary work), film producer or gallery owner to interpret them correctly and know what can and cannot be said and shown. In the event of wrong judgment and failure to receive the necessary approval for the event or dissemination of a literary work or film, all responsibility rests firmly on the shoulders of these people and the artists. Final decisions are localised through the Central Propaganda Department and other institutions' local branches, whose interpretation can vary and take into consideration local conditions. Initial approval can be withdrawn at any time, also for books that have already been published, and films that have already started to be screened. Self-censorship by the creators themselves, and "preventive" censorship by producers, event organisers, and publishers becomes the most widespread and the most effective tool of control. No gallery or publishing house wishes to be closed, no theatre festival wishes to be cancelled, and no film producer wants to see a film in which millions of RMB were invested being prevented from distribution and cut away from profit-making.

Artists who decide to continue commenting on the social reality of today's China try to find ways and strategies to do so within the boundaries of what is permitted. Similarly to Eastern Europe in the socialist era, Chinese artists proactively and creatively explore various means of indirect communication with their audiences, using allusions and other subtle means.

In visual arts one of them is a silent protest – through expressing the inability to speak or through showing emptiness in lieu of content unwelcome by the state propaganda. The other is inviting the audience to find something out for themselves – giving very weak hints and refraining from providing explicit explanations. Sometimes the title of the work offers the only suggestion on its political message. In other cases, the message looks all too clear, but the curatorial explication of the work seems oblivious to it.

In literature, two interesting approaches can be noticed, representing strategies preferred by older and younger generation writers. Senior writers in their social critique often resort to fable

or farce. Sometimes, they create intricate and elaborate allegories through which they voice their critique or shift the action to imperial China. Younger writers opt for a more toned-down aesthetic that reflects a "knowing but not speaking" attitude and show a calm distrust toward the official (historical) narratives. Especially worthy of notice is a dynamic group of young authors from China's Northeast areas known as Dongbei (the North-East), sometimes referred to as "China's Rust Belt" - an area that in the 1990s experienced massive lay-offs, deindustrialization, and economic decline. Now, its culture (and pop culture) is generating new interest across the country, labelled the "Dongbei Renaissance". The writers represent the "son generation" - descendants of laid-off workers. Their focus on a largely forgotten period of traumatic transformation can be interpreted, somewhat surprisingly, as a longing for stability and relief from anxiety.

In film, we can identify several basic approaches to how the artists express social critique and avoid censorship at the same time:

a) Explanatory and didactic postscripts

In many movies of different topics and genres, we can find "postscripts" at the very end of the movie explaining how the story relates to Chinese realities and policies. They can be interpreted as safety nets for the creators who in this way justify the critical notes of their works.

b) Marginal spaces

Many of the films tackling social topics (critiques directed at state officials or productions merely showing poverty, lack of social harmony, or crime) are set in spaces somewhat on the margins of Chinese society. In this way, the critique can be seen as non-representative of China as a whole.

c) Film genres

In the past years film directors tried escaping the rigid guidelines of the censorship system by embracing specific film genres, such as thriller or film noir, and slipping social critique into the otherwise genre-typical plots. A more recent trend is using the genre of comedy as a vehicle for subtle social critique. These films often aim for commercial success, but touch upon important social issues.

Chinese theatre embraces metaphor and allegory, and due to its inherent flexibility, production contents are often adjusted to a specific stage, time, and context. While scripts need to go through censorship, theatre directors and their casts retain some freedom as to how a given play is produced on a given stage and on a given day. There are locations where more is permitted, such as festivals away from the capital, and locations where every word pronounced on stage is monitored closely by vigilant officials sitting in the audience.

Theatre creators use their experience to assess how far they can go in their social critique in each particular place, adjusting their performances accordingly.

Conclusion - policy implications

The authors of this document propose a mapping of the most important social topics undertaken by Chinese artists and writers in the last twelve years (2012-2024), dividing the topics into three main categories of:

social and interpersonal dynamics;

economic and structural pressures;

personal identity and well-being.

Many of the topics are global in nature, such as environmental concerns, critique of neoliberalism and capitalism or dilemmas connected with technological advancement. Some are more China-specific. These include the human cost of China's economic rise, concerns with the abuse of power, or disillusionment of youth caused by social pressure, economic slowdown, and traumatic personal experiences.

Observing modern China through this "cultural looking glass" shows a society tired of ruthless economic growth, families torn apart by external financial pressure and internal generational conflicts, and young people no longer believing that personal happiness is a feasible goal to achieve. It shows a society at a certain turning point - leaving the era of hectic economic development and facing new challenges of life in an economically disappointing, tech-enhanced authoritarian state. It also shows a society very much conscious of universal issues, one that is in no way separated from the international discourse and from environmental, technological and mental pressures and problems faced by people across the globe.

Our research shows that despite tight censorship and ubiquitous practice of self-censorship, the Chinese cultural sector is not as tightly controlled as could be assumed.

There is still space for social critique, and there are still artists and writers who decide to tackle important social issues in their works. They constantly search for effective and safe ways to communicate with their audiences, including silence and emptiness to convey meaning, allusion, metaphor and allegory, focusing on topics which seem non-representative of China as a whole or adorning their critique with didactic postscripts. This creativity of working within and around the system makes such social critique possible. Their audiences learn to read subtle, indirect content and to interpret what is not said and what is not shown.

With sociological research in China increasingly difficult, it is essential to keep monitoring the Chinese cultural field for themes and content which reflect the contemporary social discourse among the middle class and the educated elites. Such analyses provide direct access to information on domestic issues and processes occurring in the country, which might not otherwise be known and noticed from the outside.

To provide a fuller picture of Chinese society across the different social strata and backgrounds, such research should be paired with large-scale discourse analysis in Chinese social media.

Ongoing **monitoring of the Chinese cultural field** should be part of EC's External Action Service routine activity. For this to be achieved, funds should be allocated, and personnel should be trained.

We advocate for research on culture to be given a higher priority than is the case today.

It is equally important to maintain communication and cooperation links with Chinese artists and writers, not only to keep our understanding of China up to date, but also to provide them with **more opportunities to link with the outside world** and, faced with mounting economic pressure, to be able to pursue their genuine artistic interests. One modest initiative that seemed to have supported the goal of keeping the communication channels open, was the EU-China International Literary Festival, held by the Delegation of the European Union to China. The event had 7 editions until 2023, but due to logistic problems was not organised in 2024. Such initiatives should be kept, and the activity of the Beijing and Hong Kong EUNIC Clusters should be expanded and better financed. It is also important to underline that EU diplomatic missions in China are unique spaces where artists can show their works without going through the official approval procedure.

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<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210810211817523> (Accessed December 2, 2024)

A list of works which form the basis for the discussion presented in this Policy Brief can be found in *Research Notes: Mapping the Social Discourse in Chinese Art and Literature of the Xi Jinping Era* by the same authors. The document includes pinyin and Chinese characters for each artist's name and each title of the work mentioned.

Cooperation with the Chinese cultural sector in times of growing uncertainties



The cover features a dark blue background with a faint, high-angle aerial view of a city skyline, likely Shanghai, with prominent skyscrapers and a river. The text is white and yellow.


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DEALING WITH A RESURGENT CHINA

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Cooperation with the Chinese cultural sector in times of growing uncertainties

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Key findings

- The Chinese cultural sectorial policy-making can be characterised as an amalgamate of central, planned-economy approach based on the single-party rule, and a strong market-oriented approach with Chinese characteristics, in which state-owned entities compete with private enterprises. The system exhibits visible regional variation with a strong role of provincial and municipal Bureaus of Culture. Publicly funded and owned organisations (public institutions) form an important part of the non-profit environment, and the creative industries (state-owned enterprises).
- The Chinese cultural sector underwent major changes during the period 2020-2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, and regulatory changes: acceleration of the transfer of cultural content to different online platforms and services; stronger presence of the Chinese Big Tech companies such as Tencent and ByteDance on the market with streaming and reading platforms, and ticket sales; explorations of alternative ways to present cultural content to audiences (both offline and online); increased regulation of the field through new laws; increased censorship and politicisation of culture. The Chinese cultural sector remains large, dynamic and innovative in spite of all the challenges.
- Despite political tensions and mounting difficulties, it is important for the EU to maintain cultural exchanges with China. Hard-got personal contacts and partnerships are a cherished resource for long-term benefit. Those EU organisations which are active in China are able to keep up with the rapid changes of this very competitive market, and embrace new opportunities. Audiences exposed to cultural content from another country are less prone to domestic, nationalistic discourse.
- Unofficial (*minjian*) cooperation between European and Chinese counterparts in the cultural field could be the most effective way of maintaining cultural contacts in the present environment. Such cooperation is also the best way to encourage European artists and presenters to compete in the Chinese cultural market. The EU could consider creating a comprehensive, long-term support scheme for such *minjian* projects in the cultural field in China.

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Introduction – the Chinese cultural sector general characteristics

The Chinese cultural field, especially as observed from the European perspective, is overpowered by the political agenda. While politics play an undeniably important role in the policy-making of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the field of culture, it is important to reach beyond the political agenda and look at the PRC cultural sector from a broader perspective.

Three principal areas in the PRC's cultural policy-making are: socialist market economy, political ideology, and the system of public service.

Chinese scholar Wen Jiaohui distinguishes three principal areas of interest in the cultural policy-making of the PRC: *socialist market economy, political ideology, and the system of public service*.¹ According to the latest Cultural Development Plan, adopted in 2022, there are five main, official objectives of the cultural policy in the PRC which could be paraphrased as:

- increasing cultural and ideological confidence of the Chinese people, as well as their motivation and proactive attitude towards further development of China;
- increasing the level of cultural refinement of the society, understood as proper behaviour, adhering to moral standards, and exhibiting proper ideological attitudes;
- developing the cultural offer to citizens in cities and the countryside, increasing heritage protection, further integrating culture and tourism, etc.;
- increasing the international outreach and influence of Chinese culture;
- continuing the regulation of the cultural sector through the introduction of new laws, and through organisational reforms; increasing overall efficiency.²

This shows that as much as the CCP sees culture as a vehicle for political ideology (both on the domestic and international level), it is also very much focused on developing the cultural sector in terms of the quality and outreach of public services, efficiency of governmental institutions and regulations, as well as promotion of market economy and creative industries.

¹ Wen Jiaohui (2020) 党的十八大以来中国文化管理体制改革的进展与趋势 (Research on China's cultural management system reforms since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. Progress and trends). 领导科学论坛. 国家治理评论 (The Forum of Leadership Science. Assessment of National Policy Management), no. 2020(04): 83-96.

² This is a summary of the main sections of the document. For a more detailed analysis of the implications of the policy guidelines for the CCS please see Zhao Kaiqiang 赵凯强 and Fan Zhou 范周, 中国文化产业“十四五”时期的几个转型 (Several transformations during the "14th Five-Year Plan" period of China's cultural industry), 当代党员 (Modern Party Member) 2022.3(405): 16-20.

From the institutional point of view, the Chinese cultural sector policy-making can be characterised as an amalgamate of central, planned-economy approach based on single-party rule, and a strong market-oriented approach with Chinese characteristics, in which state-owned entities compete with private enterprises. Specific policies and practices often put private players in a highly disadvantaged position compared to big and lavishly funded state-owned enterprises which dominate the markets, such as in the case of performing arts and film.

An amalgamate of central, planned-economy approach based on single-party rule, and a strong market-oriented approach with Chinese characteristics

This dual reality results in a constant push and pull between the ways and means of highly politicised top-down governance, and market economy entrepreneurial policies and approaches.

There is also inherent tension in the system between central and local authorities: while general policy directions are decided at the central level, local authorities are left to propose concrete solutions and

hold more than 90% of the budget for the cultural sector expenditure. This results in considerable regional variation between specific cultural policies and a marked discrepancy between rich provinces and municipalities with impressive cultural offerings, and much humbler ones in less well-off regions of the PRC.

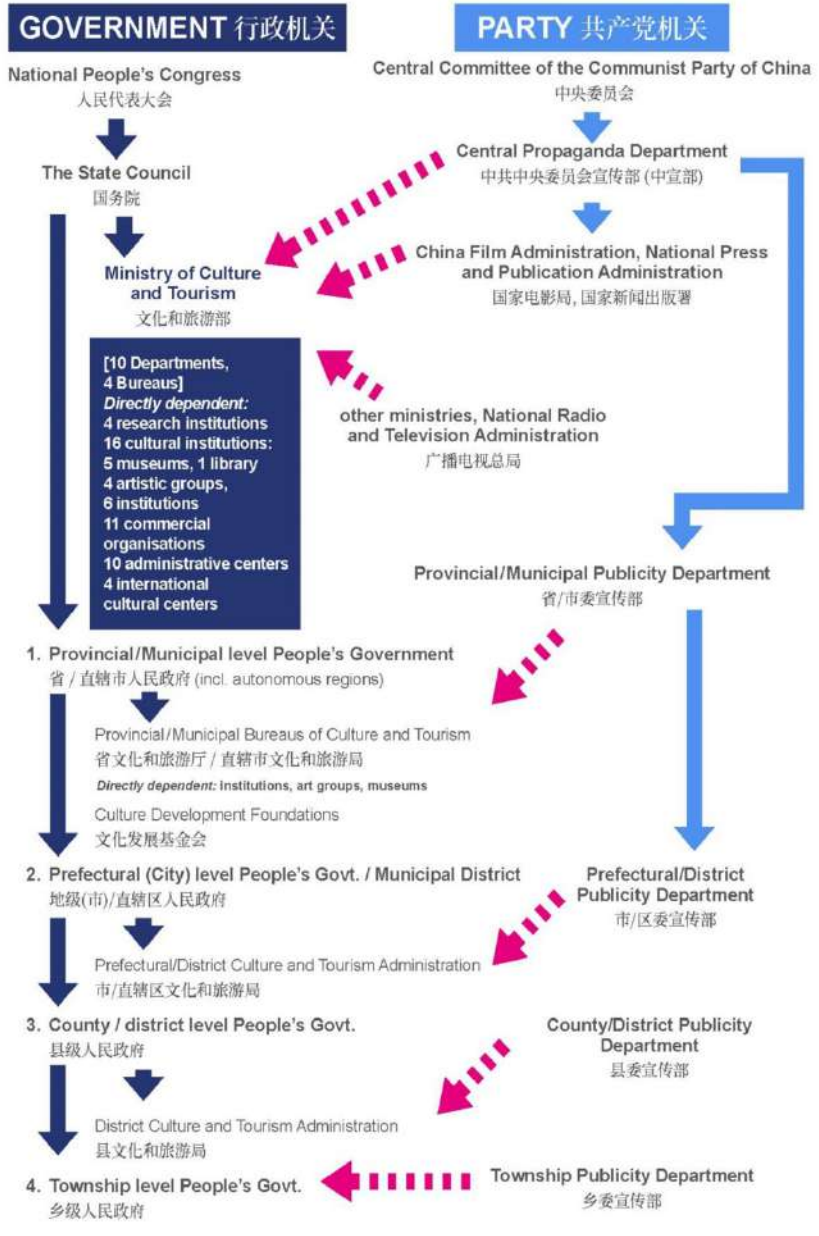
Censorship forms an integral part of the production and presentation process of cultural projects in China, and artists and producers are expected to understand what kind of content is allowed, and what narratives are especially promoted by the state's propaganda.

The long-term goal in sectoral policy-making has been to help create a robust and efficient market economy environment in which private companies thrive and public cultural institutions and organisations are incentivised to generate profit through a broad spectrum of activities carried out by themselves, their commercial subsidiaries, and their commercial partners.

The long-term goal in sectoral policy-making has been to help create a robust and efficient market economy environment in which private companies thrive and public cultural institutions and organisations receive incentives to generate profit through a broad spectrum of activities carried out by themselves, their commercial subsidiaries, and their commercial partners. Much attention at the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (further: MOCT) level has been devoted to increasing the number of cultural venues, and public participation in culture. Another important area of MOCT activity has been the fostering of growth of the creative sector.

Figure 1 (next page) shows the organisational chart of the cultural sector in China, understood as a dual institutional structure, in which the CCP exerts influence on the executive bodies at all administrative levels. The solid line in the chart signifies direct subordination and/or formal dependence, while the dashed line signifies informal dependence and/or political influence.

Governance in the cultural sector in People's Republic of China



The specificity of the Chinese cultural sector

In order to better understand the workings of the system, we focus on three distinctive features of the policy-making and the management of the cultural sector in the PRC, as described in detail below.

Local administration plays a key role in the formulation of specific policies and budget allocation for projects, institutions and organisations

The role of local administration – as already mentioned, local administration plays the key role in the formulation of specific policies and budget allocation for projects, institutions and organisations. In the field of culture, local People's Governments act through the Provincial Bureaus of Culture and Tourism (*Sheng wenhua he luyou ting* 省文化和旅游厅), or the Municipal Bureaus of Culture and Tourism (*Zhixishi wenhua he luyou ju* 直辖市文化和旅游局) which are separate administrative bodies (public institutions), directly responsible to the People's Governments, with annual budget allocation from the People's Governments. They also receive funds directly from the MOCT, usually on targeted subsidy programs or specific projects. The Bureaus typically have numerous subsidiaries, e.g. in Beijing there are 13 such institutions (including libraries, orchestras, and theatres), and administrative centres, which are separate administrative entities devoted to a certain sphere of activity under the responsibility of the Bureau, for example, Promotion Center, Cultural Exchange Center, etc. The Bureaus also actively engage with private or quasi-private actors, such as state-owned companies which run theatre and concert halls belonging to local authorities (e.g. the Poly Group which plays the dominant role in venue and artistic management in China) or organise large-scale festivals (e.g. the China Arts and Entertainment Group).

Districts in major cities, as well as prefectures and townships, have some influence on the specific ways policies are implemented locally, but their financial means are limited. They operate local Bureaus of Culture or Cultural Centers, with activities mainly meeting the needs of smaller, local communities. Some bigger and more affluent districts organise larger cultural events (e.g. Chaoyang district in Beijing), but most large-scale support and policy implementation is concentrated at the provincial or municipal level.

Public institutions and non-governmental actors – cultural organisations run by the state or local administration, such as museums, theatres or artistic groups have the legal status of non-profit organisations (NPO), and more specifically - *public institutions* (*shiyew danwei* 事业单位). While they cannot directly engage in profit-generating activity, they are allowed to found commercial subsidiaries. Profits thus generated - according to the principle of non-distribution constraint - must be redistributed to the statutory purposes of the public institution in question. Even the MOCT itself has four such direct subsidiaries. These are large-scale and influential state-owned companies operating on the market: the China Culture Media Group Co. Ltd (中国文化传媒集团有限公司), the China Oriental Performing Arts Group Co. Ltd (中国东方演艺集团)

团有限公司), the China Digital Culture Group Co. Ltd (中国数字文化集团有限公司), and the China Animation Group Co. Ltd (中国动漫集团有限公司). Each of the four has numerous other subsidiaries, creating a whole system of companies linked to the MOCT.

Apart from public institutions, other NPOs allowed by the state include social associations (*shehui tuanti* 社会团体), social service organisations (*shehui fuwu jigou* 社会服务机构) or foundations (*jijinhui* 基金会). All need to be approved by the local Civil Affairs Bureau (*Minzhengju* 民政局) before they can start operating, although in practice, in the past there have been many instances of NPOs working for numerous years without such an approval.³ In general, in the field of culture, small NPOs operating on a local scale, officially approved or not, are quite common while larger, private not-for-profits are rare.

Cultural and creative sectors – cultural policy-makers in the PRC have recognised the importance of the creative industries (*wenhua chanye* 文化产业) already in the 1990s, with the first policies introduced during the 10th Five-Year Plan (2001-2005). Since the 2014 *Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Development of Characteristic Cultural Industries* (关于推动特色文化产业发展的指导意见), a new regulation devoted to the sector is published on average once every two years. Central and local governments have introduced a number of forms of financial support (tax incentives, subsidies, low-interest rate loans) to promote the development of the sector. The central government has also initiated major projects such as cultural clusters for specific industries, supporting leading companies and strategic investors, and promoting investment in high-tech cultural assets.⁴

Though aimed at activating a free market economy, these policies are profitable first and foremost for large, state-owned market leaders. Poly Group has by far been the most powerful player on the cultural scene for years, with a country-wide network of theatres and concert halls, artistic agencies, productions agencies, touring agencies, one of China's biggest art auction houses (Poly Auction), an impressive art collection, etc. Other quasi-private actors include the Beijing Gehua Cultural Development Group, or the China Arts and Entertainment Group (CAEG) – the commercial arm of the MOCT. The division between public and private actors in the field of culture is thus very much blurred.

³ Salmenkari, Taru (2018). *Civil Society in China and Taiwan*. London: Routledge, 2018: 101-110.

⁴ White, Andrew and Xu, Sujing (2012). A Critique of China's cultural policy and the development of its cultural and creative industries: The case of Shanghai. *Cultural Trends* 21 (3): 249-257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2012.698558> (accessed 23 September 2023).

Post COVID-19 developments

The Chinese cultural field has gone through numerous changes in recent years, some of them of disruptive character. The COVID-19 pandemic and its containment policies meant three years of restrictions, lockdowns, and loss of revenues for numerous cultural event organisers, artists, creators, and managers. At the same time, it was also a period of innovation in presenting various art forms online and acceleration of the transfer of cultural content to different online platforms and services.

The film industry illustrates best the losses incurred by the cultural sector in terms of new productions, event organisation, and ticket sales. In 2020, cinema theatres were closed for 178 days, and the box office dropped by 68,17% YoY.⁵ In 2022 the box office was down 53,2% compared to 2019, and 36,4% compared to 2021.⁶ Only 322 new Chinese films entered theatres between 2020 -2022, compared to 400 between 2017-2019. Dramatic theatres, concert halls, and most cultural venues incurred similar losses over the three years. While some minor projects and local performances were successfully organised, it was almost impossible for the venues and festivals to host any significant foreign productions or projects.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced presenters to search for new ways of reaching their audiences

The COVID-19 pandemic forced presenters to search for new ways of reaching their audiences. Firstly, some institutions, such as the China National Peking Opera Company, introduced their streaming services and online festivals. Others engaged main internet platforms to jointly present cultural content online, such as the 5G Smart Theatre, an incentive of the National Theater of China with Huawei and China Unicom. Big Tech proactively

moved swiftly into the cultural productions streaming services: ByteDance launched the DOU 有好戏, both Tencent and Alibaba started working with major ticket-selling platforms Maoyan and Tao Piao Piao to increase video-on-demand online viewing and online cultural performance streaming sales. With many domestic art fairs suspended, private art galleries also experimented with online sales of artworks especially through Tencent's Weidian, while at the same time increasing their presence in WeChat.

Intense discussions about the challenges faced by the theatre industry due to the pandemic served as a central catalyst for substantial changes in the field. Some new festivals were designed from the outset with the view of increasing their resilience to pandemic-type risks. 2021 saw the first edition of the Aranya Theatre Festival. Featuring open-air venues, an extensive array of site-specific performances set against the waterfront landscape, and a series of highly commercial, interwoven exhibitions, the festival not only promotes the concept of theatre tourism but also encourages a randomly sparked creative process based on a predefined formula. In 2022 the Shekou Theatre Festival was first launched. A strong emphasis on revitalising urban spaces through site-specific hybrid productions, implementing

⁵ Yin, Hong & Sun, Yanbin. (2021). Analysis of China's Film Industry in 2020. *Journal of Chinese Film Studies*, 1 (2), 295-328. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcfs-2021-0029> (accessed 23 September 2023).

⁶ Maoyan Dianying 猫眼电影 2022 Annual Report.

https://www.maoyan.com/news/12937504?utm_source=touch (accessed 23 September 2023).

an incubation model, and aiming to foster connections among the scattered cultural diasporas across the Pearl River Delta Region constitute the essence of the event. The premiere edition of the Sphinx Metaverse Theatre Festival, held in April 2023 presented a comprehensive showcase of innovations in both distribution systems and artistic approaches. The festival, backed by 17 domestic and foreign high-tech companies, serves as a broad discussion forum, taking into account the potential of theatre as an intermediary between artists, VR, AR, MR and AI service leaders, and game producers.

Even though literature increased its market share in the post-pandemic years,⁷ publishers still suffered noticeable losses, and were forced to redefine their selling models, shifting the focus onto online platforms. Readjustments also involved the medium (as audiobooks became more popular) and promotional strategies. Works of fiction became frequently promoted on live broadcasts on social media platforms.⁸ Initial forced push to online meetings with authors has recently eased, and from 2023 live events are again preferred by audiences.⁹

Online literature continued its dynamic growth, with increased sales on platforms such as China Reading or Qidian. In 2021 online literature accounted for 40% of fiction book sales.¹⁰ In 2023, with over 700 thousand officially registered and active authors, and nearly 500 million readers¹¹, online literature becomes an incubator of new audiences and new cultural products, redefining the understanding of literature. The pandemic's new reality has only boosted the pan-entertainment (*fan yule* 泛娱乐) industry – as popular online literature sagas and other similar intellectual property become bases for multilevel creative products, such as TV dramas, movies, musicals, animation and gaming titles. At present, about 60% of Chinese TV drama screenplays originate from online literature. With such scale and scope of the online literature market, it is viewed in China as a global cultural phenomenon, compared to Japanese manga or Korean dramas.

More risk management is required from cultural organisations, managers and presenters from abroad who are willing to engage with China.

Forced cutting off of the Chinese cultural scene from the international market during the three COVID-19 years has increased the appetite to host foreign productions at performing arts festivals and venues, starting from 2023. In some cases this has proved to be difficult, due to growing political tensions between the collective West (especially the US) and China, complicated cultural event approval procedures, and most of all, a strong feeling of

⁷ Ren, Dianshun, and Kang Zishuang "How COVID-19 Has Affected China's Publishing Industry", National Center for Biotechnology Information, July 2021.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8294607/> (accessed 8 October 2023).

⁸ Anderson, Porter. "China's Book Sales in 2022: An 11.77-Percent Decline", *Publishing Perspectives*, 7 February 2023. <https://publishingperspectives.com/2023/02/chinas-book-market-in-2022-an-11-77-percent-decline/> (accessed 8 October 2023).

⁹ Information from translators and scholars regularly visiting the PRC.

¹⁰ Anderson, Porter. "Beijing International Book Fair Reports 2,500+ Exhibitors", *Publishing Perspectives*, 21 June 2023. <https://publishingperspectives.com/2023/06/beijing-international-book-fair-reports-2500-exhibitors/> (accessed 23 September 2023).

¹¹ Information from a well-known online literature writer, Mr. Yang Hanliang 杨汉亮.

uncertainty about the domestic regulatory environment. More risk management is required from cultural organisations, managers and presenters from abroad who are willing to engage with China in this new international reality. Many of them decide not to take this risk, and avoid the Chinese market altogether.

The three COVID-19 years marked a gradual increase of state control over the cultural sector in terms of regulation, censorship, and ideological orientation of culture. The year 2021 was important in this respect: a number of new laws were introduced on public cultural services, cultural market economy, and technical innovation in culture, among others.¹² The general direction of the new regulation has been the deepening of market economy reform, the fostering of cultural sector revenue generation, a recognition of technical advancement and the importance of platform economy in culture. The Central Propaganda Department (CPD) of the CCP has increased its leverage over authorities at all levels of administration in terms of cultural content scrutiny. All decisions of central and local institutions concerning the content of cultural productions and presentations now need to seek approval of either the CPD headquarters or the local Publicity Departments at the provincial/municipal, prefectural/district or county level.¹³ There is an increased push for artists and presenters to work fully in line with the flagship propaganda policies of the Xi Jinping era - promote "Chinese values", and "tell the Chinese story well"¹⁴ through culture, with a clear focus on film.¹⁵ This has provoked the feeling of being hemmed in, and reactions of withdrawal, with some creators, especially visual artists and filmmakers, either avoiding potentially controversial topics altogether or focussing on social work and education rather than individual artistic activity.

Despite all these changes and challenges, the Chinese cultural sector is vibrant. According to the official Chinese statistical data, the number of performance venues, museums and art galleries has been steadily increasing at an impressive pace of 15% YoY. There is fierce competition between presenters over the audiences, an ever-increasing volume of cultural productions available to viewers, listeners and readers, especially online, with the leading online streaming platforms such as iQiyi, Youku and Tencent Videos attracting over 660 million users (2022). There is also a spirit of innovation in terms of content production and presentation, with a full embrace of the newest technology. Government policies continue to foster market-related changes through market-focused regulatory activity and incentives.

¹² For full analysis of the changed in the Chinese regulatory environment in culture see Xiao, Bo 肖波 and Ning, Lanyu 宁蓝玉 (2023) 中国文化治理研究三十年: 理论、政策与实践 (Thirty Years of Cultural Governance Research in China: Theory, Policy and Practice). 湖北民族大学学报 哲学社会科学版 (Journal of the Hunan Minzu University, Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), vol 2023 no. 1: 42-53.

¹³ Information gained directly from officials working at Chinese cultural institutions.

¹⁴ "THE CMP DICTIONARY: Telling China's Story Well 讲好中国的故事". The China Project, 16 April 2021. https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/telling-chinas-story-well/ (accessed 2 October 2023).

¹⁵ For example, "14th 5 Year Chinese Film Development Plan" (十四五治 中国电影发展规划) published by China Film Administration (中国电影局) explicitly mentions "increasing of the international influence power [of Chinese film]" (提升国际影响力) and "using film to tell China's story well" (用电影讲好中国故事). "十四五治 中国电影发展规划" (14th 5 Year Chinese Film Development Plan). 中国电影局 (China Film Administration), 5 November 2012, p. 16. <https://www.chinafilm.gov.cn/xwzx/ywxx/202111/P020211114397447198771.pdf> (accessed 2 October, 2023).

The Chinese government considers the cultural sector crucial for the post-pandemic recovery of China's domestic economy.¹⁶ There is strong political support for boosting domestic cultural production as well as consumption, with several Chinese government policy documents voicing explicitly the focus on the need to rebuild and create a better, more powerful market system based on domestic productions.¹⁷

The gains of continued cultural exchange

Operating on the Chinese cultural market is difficult and costly but can be very rewarding in the long term. Firstly, it is important to recognise the sheer size and variety of the market, and its dynamic nature – being present and competing in such an environment is a feat by itself, requiring insider knowledge, good networking, and flexibility. The biggest reward for European organisations active on the Chinese cultural market might lie in the understanding of new products and services which are appearing at a rapid rate. Keeping up with the market means being innovative, and as such is very motivating for the organisation and its employees. China's cultural sector can function as an inspiration for new products and services to be introduced in Europe. A good example is online literature – China seems to be the first market where the reader base is built through an intricate combination of book episode readership, social media interactions, events, gadgets, and finally the full book product which completes the journey of the reader-customer as a final reward for loyalty and engagement. In the modern age of fragmented narratives, reader restlessness, and general book readership decrease this seems to be a very interesting proposal for boosting readership at scale.

Secondly, China is presently undergoing a period of politicisation of culture, strong censorship and an ever-tightening grip of Xi Jinping's authoritarian rule, and this tendency is very likely to be ongoing. The European cultural sector is also not without its own challenges, including political pressure in some EU countries to promote certain narratives over others. In this difficult time, it is still vital for European organisations not to withdraw fully from the Chinese cultural market, as re-entry at some point in the future when the winds of change blow favourably might prove to be very difficult. Chinese cultural presenters and managers cherish long-term friendships, and Chinese audiences cherish artists who return to China at regular intervals. It is not easy to build strong cooperation bonds within the sector; once they are established, they need to be preserved despite political, financial and other challenges. Culture is one of the

¹⁶ See especially the *Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on further enhancing consumption potential and promoting the sustained recovery of consumption* 国务院办公厅关于进一步释放消费潜力促进消费持续恢复的意见. Central Government of the PRC 中华人民共和国中央人民政府, 24 April 2022. https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2022-04/25/content_5687079.htm (accessed 2 October 2023).

¹⁷ In the particular case of film case of film, for example, the Chinese government set a goal of "keeping the annual ratio of domestic film production box office above 55%" (国产影片年度票房占比 保持在 55% 以上). "十四五 中国电影发展规划" (14th 5 Year Chinese Film Development Plan). 中国电影局 (China Film Administration), 5 November 2012, p. 4. <https://www.chinafilm.gov.cn/xwzx/ywxx/202111/P020211114397447198771.pdf> (accessed 2 October, 2023)

fields of activity with prolonged planning and slow decision-making processes. This makes long-term friendships even more valuable, as attractive “quick deals” are hardly possible.

Lastly, it is important to make the European voices heard in China and vice versa. The value of culture in diplomacy has long been recognised. In the times of increased nationalism, anti-Western narratives in China, and anti-Chinese discourse in the West, culture offers a solution to de-escalate tensions. EU cultural productions show the complexity and variety of issues, attitudes, and opinions expressed by artists in different EU states, and thus help promote an open and heterogenous image of the bloc. This also helps in differentiating the EU from the over-simplistic, collective labelling of “the West”, in China usually meaning “American”. Showing how different European and American cultural identities are can be beneficial both to the EU and to its Atlantic partner in breaking the harmful and dangerous dichotomy of “China versus the West” strongly present in Chinese public discourse. The EU should also remain open to Chinese cultural productions which offer a glimpse of the many-faced modern Chinese society.

While Xi Jinping encourages artists to “tell the Chinese story well”, the presence of the EU in the Chinese cultural market should, therefore, also serve as a counterbalance to this concept – presenting various European discourses to Chinese audiences. In this sense it is vital to keep cultural exchange and mutual influence flowing both ways.

It is also important to mention and acknowledge that there exists a strong willingness and openness of Chinese artists to cooperate with European partners. Different cultural fields, however, present different obstacles as well as different sets of rules for cooperation. The film industry, for many reasons, is a field more complicated than others. Chinese artists and producers themselves admit that while there is a strong desire to cooperate, European and American companies are now less eager to enter the Chinese markets, some of the reasons being restrictions on money flows, and harsh censorship.¹⁸ Also, the rules for film co-production in China between foreign and Chinese production companies are quite strict, which makes co-productions, especially for lower-budget films, more difficult. In particular, a special permit needs to be issued by the China Film Administration, the film must be first made in Mandarin and only then translated into another language, and it must be first permitted for screening in China before it can be allowed into international distribution.¹⁹

On the other hand, the reasons for failed cooperation or market entry do not always have to be of a political or legal nature. Especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, financial factors play an important role. According to the Maoyan Dianying 猫眼电影 2022 Annual Report, between 2020-2022 the number of films screened in China in so-called “minor languages” (other language than the official UN languages - Chinese, English, Arabic, Russian, French and Spanish) rapidly decreased and so did their box office. Crisis-stricken movie theatres and production companies simply did not have the resources to buy such films, not to mention doing proper marketing promotion to attract audiences. As a result,

¹⁸ Shackleton, Liz. “China’s Film Industry Is Bouncing Back & Open For Co-Production, But Lacks Diversity – Bridging The Dragon.” Deadline, 24 May 2023. <https://deadline.com/2023/05/china-film-industry-co-production-bouncing-back-women-filmmakers-1235377628/> (accessed 2 October 2023).

¹⁹ Regulations on the Administration of Sino-foreign Cooperative Production of Films 中外合作摄制电影片管理规定. China Film Administration 中国电影局 11 December 2017. https://www.chinafilm.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfg/bmgz/202112/t20211214_441292.html (accessed 2 October 2023).

minor language films made only 2 % of the total box office in China in 2022. Among best-performing films were only two European: a German-Russian-Belarusian co-production from 2020 *Persian Lessons (Persischstunden)*, and an Italian film *Life is Beautiful (La vita è bella)* from 1997.²⁰

Unlike the film industry, in the field of theatre, cooperation with foreign artists has returned to its pre-pandemic level. The most recognisable and representative Wuzhen Theatre Festival shows a stable proportion of foreign productions. 14 foreign productions are presented at the 2023 edition of the Festival, with strong and consistent representation from European countries such as Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Poland, and the UK. While the interest in foreign contemporary dance and physical theatre companies visibly increases, the number of traditional domestic operas staged during the international theatre festivals in China continues to decrease. Among the newly launched festivals, the Aranya Theatre Festival points towards the introduction of foreign dramas to domestic audiences through the Space Performing and Reading activity, while the Shekou Theatre Festival proposes a Foreign Forum section, inviting curators from abroad to share their opinions on domestic productions and explore further collaboration opportunities. While the Chinese theatre industry turns towards smaller productions and working-with-locality objective, there is, nevertheless, a strong drive to deepen international exchange.

Unofficial (*minjian*) exchange

minjian cooperation is allowed, and often encouraged, as long as it does not trespass the official political guidelines

In times of increased tensions and uncertainties, long-term European cultural presence in China should, as much as possible, be free from the ebbs and flows of everyday politics. As the EU – China relations project to be complex and tense in the coming future, it would be advisable to try and detach European cultural activity in China from the sphere of politics. One way of doing this is – apart from maintaining formal cultural exchange by means of officially sanctioned projects, in which EU Cultural Ministries and EU diplomatic services in the PRC

are directly involved - focusing on long-term *minjian* relations, giving voice to a number of minor actors and uplifting a resilient architecture for this exchange. *Minjian* denotes the sphere of people-to-people and institution-to-institution cooperation which occurs outside the official country-to-country exchange. While nothing is now under the radar of the CCP and its Central Propaganda Department, *minjian* cooperation is allowed, and often encouraged, as long as it does not trespass the official political guidelines. Making sure that it doesn't is the responsibility of local presenters who need to seek approval of the CPD or its local Publicity Departments for each event they organise, and each product they disseminate.

²⁰ Maoyan Dianying 猫眼电影 2022 Annual Report. https://www.maoyan.com/news/12937504?utm_source=touch (accessed 23 September 2023).

Building lasting *minjian* partnerships is a demanding, long-term process, requiring financial investments and expertise which is often beyond the reach of European artists, artistic groups, cultural organisations, managers and presenters. Therefore, *minjian* cooperation with Chinese partners could be systemically encouraged in the EU through generous funding schemes and consulting. Fostering *minjian* exchange is a long process with results, depending on the field of activity, visible sometimes only 3 to 5 years later. Therefore, the flexibility and sustained stability of the support system is of key importance.

Conclusion – policy implications

The authors of this document attempted to demonstrate that in the present, difficult phase of EU – China relations it is important to ensure continued EU cultural presence in the PRC. Despite COVID-19 pandemic disruptions and the autocratic turn of Xi Jinping's rule, the Chinese cultural field maintains its dynamic and innovative characteristics. The European creators and cultural presenters need to be there to follow new developments, embrace new technologies, and stay competitive. From a political point of view, it is advantageous to continue European-Chinese cultural exchange. At the same time, the authors suggest that directing the effort from the typical public diplomacy sphere towards the unofficial (*minjian*) channels could be beneficial in the long term in terms of effectiveness, market orientation, and political de-risking.

When fostering *minjian* exchanges, it is advisable to recognise the highly competitive nature of the Chinese cultural sector and focus on cultural productions having good market potential in the PRC. This does not necessarily mean concentrating on pop culture for mass audiences. Rather than that, it means recognising the interests of local presenters and basing programming decisions on their own understanding of their audiences, and not on the preferences of European partners.

EU partners should be advised not to test the unwritten limits of freedom in the *minjian* exchange they are pursuing. The political safety of local presenters should be of paramount importance. Their own assessment of what can and cannot be allowed should serve as the principal guidance in choosing cultural productions (and adjusting their content when necessary) to fit in with the Chinese regulations. EU partners should not be tempted to sneak disallowed content in, as one such action can derail many years of efforts, destroying the trust of local partners, endangering their livelihood and possibly also personal freedom.

It would be advisable for the EU to consider creating incentives for European artists, presenters and cultural organisations to pursue minjian cooperation with their Chinese counterparts.

It would be advisable for the EU to consider creating incentives for European artists, presenters and cultural organisations to pursue *minjian* cooperation with their Chinese counterparts. In order to achieve results, these should take the form of a comprehensive, long-term support scheme. Such a scheme should include organising study visits to and from China for presenters (venue artistic managers, festival programmers, publishers, etc.), workshops, supporting translation and interpretation services, covering transportation fees, visa costs and plane tickets for performers (these are usually not covered by presenters in China), reimbursing other costs of projects which cannot be covered by Chinese partners in a given project. There should also be consulting available, include such areas of expertise as the specificity of the Chinese cultural sector and its regulatory framework, cross-cultural differences, Chinese business and negotiation culture, strategy for building partnerships in China, as well as more mundane, everyday advice on how to deal with small challenges and difficulties of project management between the EU and China. More can be gained from establishing such support infrastructure for the EU cultural sector than from organising expensive, one-off presentations of European culture in China through the typical public diplomacy means.

As working with the Chinese cultural sector entails extra risks of a political nature (such as sudden cancelling of a cultural event, failure to receive performance permissions on time, visa refusals, domestic crackdowns and sudden legal changes affecting ongoing projects) – mitigating these risks requires funding flexibility (e.g. moving funding to the next budgetary year or financing framework), expert counselling, extended insurance, and early planning.

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