

Reflections on Metacritical Analysis

Chengzhou He

Abstract: As a criticism of criticism, metacritical analysis is inseparable from critical theory and practice, which constitutes a distinctive feature of all the essays in this column. In correspondence with Wang Ning's academic contributions, the approaches that those essays undertake can be mainly categorized into the following three, namely, historical-contextual, intercultural, post-theoretical and post-critical, which are also representative of major modes of criticism in literary studies in recent decades. It needs to be emphasized that the three approaches are not conflicting but rather complementary and supplementary both within individual essays and in general terms. It argues that a relatively thorough and comprehensive analysis of the literary studies by such Chinese scholars as Wang Ning can hardly be accomplished without deep reflections on the status quo of literary criticism and its future directions.

Keywords: metacriticism; literary theory; world literature; cosmopolitanism; Wang Ning

Author: **Chengzhou He**, Yangtze River distinguished professor of English and drama, School of Arts and School of Foreign Studies, Nanjing University (Nanjing 210093, China). Foreign member of *Academia Europaea* (Email: chengzhou@nju.edu.cn).

标题: 对元批评分析的反思

内容摘要: 作为对于批评的批评,元批评分析与批评理论和实践密不可分,这也正是本期专栏所有文章的一个显著特征。与王宁的学术贡献相对应,本文主要采取以下三种研究视角,即历史语境的、跨文化的、后理论和后批评的,这也是近几十年以来文学研究中主要批评模式的代表。需要强调的是,这三种方法并不冲突,无论是在单篇论文中还是从一般意义上来说,都是相互补充、互为助益的。对王宁等中国学者的文学研究进行较为透彻和全面的分析,离不开对文学批评现状及其未来发展方向的深刻反思。

关键词: 元批评;文学理论;世界文学;世界主义;王宁

作者简介: 何成洲,南京大学艺术学院和外国语学院长江学者特聘教授,欧洲科学院外籍院士。

A criticism of criticism, which features all the essays in this column, is called

metacriticism, which “examines theories or critical approaches to textual meaning, author-text-reader relationships, and the criteria by which texts and other cultural artefacts should be judged” (Makaryk 102). To put it differently, metacritical analysis engages a critique of various possible modes of reading literary works, reflections on the efficacy of literary theories and their interrelatedness, contemplations on the relationship between literary writing, critical work and different aspects of social life, and explorations on the future directions of literary theory and criticism.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, how metacriticism is related to criticism is still a very complicated issue. “Metacriticism and criticism as well as metacriticism and critical theory are logically independent of each other, but they are not incompatible” (Raval 239). Metacriticism does not replace criticism, but rather is entangled with different modes of criticism, the complexities of which are subject to further scrutiny. “Criticism, literary theory and metacriticism are all logically independent of each other, but the distinctions among them are not precisely marked, and every question raised does not allow for instantly recognizable classificatory categories” (Preminger and Brogan 757). On the one hand, metacriticism as a study of criticism retains its unique features and performs its special roles; on the other hand, it is closely integrated into or interwoven with the process of criticism and theoretical discussions.

Take critical concepts as an example. In literary studies, such concepts as cosmopolitanism and poetics are generally applicable in textual analysis. However, those concepts are so complicated and unstable that they are always subject to criticism and revision. Referring to Wittgenstein, Suesh Raval explains that we “are unable clearly to circumscribe the concepts we use; not because we don’t know their real definition, but because there is no real ‘definition’ to them” (247). Without doubt, critical concepts constitute the focus of metacriticism, since they will be under constant reinterpretation and reformulation, which does not undermine but rather gives new impetus to the value of critical discourse. “The built-in inadequacy of each concept accounts for the contesting and changing nature of conceptual structures in humanistic discourse” (Raval 247). In addition to interdisciplinarity, interculturalism is also accountable for the so-called “inadequacy” of certain concepts, for example world literature and globalization. Thus, metacritical analysis and debates around certain key concepts as well as relevant scholars remain to be a crucial and exciting part of literary scholarship, as the essays in this column have revealed.

In metacritical analysis, a descriptive restatement of the existing critical work is intersected by reflective commentaries and revisions. “A broader and historically more informed form of metacriticism would embrace the tasks of both

descriptivists and revisionists, seeking to show why critical vocabulary cannot be standardized or improved (in the sense of being logically grounded) beyond a point, and how a sound and intelligent critical practice need not remain strictly bound by a particular set of criteria” (Preminger and Brogan 759). As the essays in the column have demonstrated, metacritical analysis is made to fulfill a variety of different academic purposes: both a critique of Wang Ning’s academic writings and a reevaluation of the related academic field, both a retrospective reflection of Chinese literary criticism in the past four decades and a look-ahead of its future, both a contemplation of the universality of literature and literary theory and a recognition of their exceptional uniqueness. To clarify as well as classify some major statements in those essays with reference to metacritical analysis in general, it will benefit from the following three approaches, namely historical-contextual, intercultural, post-critical and post-theoretical. It needs to be emphasized that the three approaches are not conflicting but rather complementary and supplementary. It is in our deep reflections on the status quo of literary criticism and its future directions that a relatively thorough and comprehensive study of the contributions in literary studies by such Chinese scholars as Wang Ning may be better situated.

1. Context Still Matters

In *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski puts forward an unusual and provocative statement “context stinks,” through which she launches an assault on the hermeneutic tradition in literary studies. Though challenged by literary scholars like Susan Sontag, Amanda Anderson, Toril Moi, Joseph North and so on, historical and contextual criticism remains a useful approach, and practices of literary criticism also need to be situated in a certain context. “The historicist (or pragmatist) view, on the other hand, considers criticism and its theories to be quasi-autonomous rather than fully autonomous, and shows them to be situated in particular historical, institutional, and cultural contexts” (Preminger and Brogan 759). Though having made steady and remarkable progress, contemporary Chinese literary criticism is confronted with some serious problems, which are both its symptoms and what it resolves to deal with.

The unbalanced literary and cultural exchanges between China and the West are believed to be partly accountable for misunderstandings and distortions in the Western representations of China and Chinese culture. The translation of foreign, Western in particular, literature into Chinese, as has been widely known, has overwhelmed significantly the translation of Chinese literature into foreign languages, especially English. As has been emphasized by David Damrosch in his

conception of world literature, translation is one of the most important factors to facilitate literary transmission and exert cultural impact. In “Translating Modernity and Reconstructing World Literature,” Wang Ning argues that “[t]ranslation will continue to function dynamically in deconstructing the West-centric mode of world literature and reconstructing new world literature” (111). In reference to Lu Xun’s “importism” (nalai zhuyi), Ji Xianlin calls for “exportism” (songqu zhuyi), which Wang Ning frequently refers to in his articles and lectures. In addition, Wang Ning is also an ardent practitioner of exportism in that he supervised “Chinese Classics Translation Project”, through which a large number of Chinese literary works across genres, be it novel or poetry or drama, were translated and published in English with prestigious Western academic press. Considering the inadequacy of English publications about or from China, it is necessary for Chinese-to-English translation not to be limited to literature but to extend over a variety of different kinds of writings. Furthermore, in this digital era, the transmission of Chinese literature and culture should take full advantages of different media forms, including film and internet. It has been widely acknowledged that Mo Yan’s international fame and his subsequent honor of winning the Nobel Prize in literature is to some extent indebted to the successful film adaptation based on his first novel *The Red Sorghum* (Hong Gaoliang).

The controversial Western hegemony in literary theory and criticism gives rise to the anxiety of influence among Chinese scholars, especially when so little of Chinese literary theory has been introduced into the West. “Unfortunately, for lack of translation and critical introduction, some of these discussions are seldom heard in the outside world, like many renowned Chinese theorists or scholars, including Qian Zhongshu, Li Zehou, and Liu Zaifu. Consequently, Chinese-Western literary and cultural interaction remains largely unidirectional, with too few opportunities for balanced exchange” (Wang and Brown 246). Admittedly, the introduction of Western theories has played a significant role in advancing modernity in China, so they have been more or less assimilated into Chinese academic discourse. Any simplistic, binary distinction between Chinese and Western theories turns out to be unfounded and detrimental to the progress of critical entrepreneurship, let alone culture and society. “To compete, you have to understand, but to understand, you also have to compete—to find how foreign sources resonate with and empower your native culture without letting them overpower it” (Wang and Brown 246). On the other hand, it will be naïve not to be able to realize the fact that the Western sovereign has shaped its critical discourse, which seeks to defend its own interest. Therefore, it becomes necessary for Chinese scholars to carry on dialogues with

their Western counterparts, to influence their habitual (mis-)understandings of things Chinese, and to implement certain revisions on Western theories and criticism. In terms of world literature, Damrosch is said to be conservative, upholding the mainstream values in the West. In his various encounters with Damrosch and other scholars, Wang Ning in “Chinese Literature as World Literature” states that “Chinese literature should be regarded as an integral part of world literature” (380). With such innovative concepts as world literatures and new world literature, Wang Ning along with Cao Sunqing, Fang Weigui and so on, contributes to a critique of West-centrism in world literature studies.

The status quo of Chinese literature and literary theories does not reflect the growing impact of Chinese economy and China’s importance in the world system. Will the new world system, of which China is a significant part and in which China is assuming an increasingly important role, be a catalyst to the theoretical innovations in Chinese scholarship and its global impact? In *Against World Literature*, Emily Apter reflects on how literature would respond to the changes in the world system. “Ideally, one could redesign the teaching of literature to respond critically and in real time to cartographies of emergent world systems” (Apter 39). Nevertheless, it seems that the teaching of Chinese literature is still rather limited at schools and universities in the West. At least, it is true that in those English language anthologies of world literature, as Wang Ning has regrettably pointed out, Chinese literature is disproportionately underrepresented. Recently, the so-called “Western impact/Chinese response” model has been under unprecedented challenges and revisions. The complaint towards the dominance of Western theories is being converted into the much-needed innate motivating force to become more innovative and creative in theory-making. In the meantime, some related issues need to be addressed properly.

At least since the reform and opening-up in the late 1970s, Western theoretical discourses have multiplied and prevailed in Chinese academia, and they have become gradually integrated into Chinese theory and criticism. It should be acknowledged that the introduction and appropriation of Western theories have been very productive just like Western science, technology and higher education that have contributed to the progress of Chinese modernity. Nevertheless, it is equally justifiable to be critical of the dominance of Western theories in Chinese academia as well as their weaknesses, which have also been under critique by Western scholars themselves. On the other hand, it is also not in favor of our academic work to completely denigrate Western theories as being no longer of use or inapplicable to Chinese reality. Thus, neither universalism nor exceptionalism would do good

to the prospects of theoretical advancement. As Liu Kang points out earlier in his essay, they “cannot be viewed as binary and mutual exclusions. Rather, it is overdetermined by multiple factors of integration and complementarity.” Without doubt, new theories will benefit from cross-disciplinary perspectives and from taking into account cultural practices both local and global.

In this respect, academic dialogues between Chinese and Western scholars on an equal basis prove to be extremely valuable and beneficiary. “By debating, we come to understand what our respondents draw out, the unplumbed premises and biases in their thinking and knowledge, and ultimately, we hope, in ours” (Wang and Brown 247). So far, as has been unanimously acknowledged by many of my colleagues home and abroad, the various international conferences, seminars, special issues at international journals as well as lectures by high-profile international scholars that Wang Nang has (co-)organized over the last forty years or so both in and outside of China have helped facilitate the academic exchanges across borders, which succeed one way or another in changing the mindsets of scholars on both sides towards literature and culture alien to their own. “And to grasp the complexity of the concept of literature is to realize that literary works do not share common features among them so that one can describe their necessary and sufficient qualities. The critic who has grasped this complexity does not look for the same set of experiential features in all literary works, but rather knows how to apprehend the diversity of their contexts, however indeterminate and shifting these contexts might be” (Ravel 245). The same is true with literary theories. Chinese literary theories are subject to changing social and cultural realities, whose complexities would be incomprehensible without sufficient, effective cross-cultural communications in different forms.

The growing impact of Chinese literature and literary theories is no doubt inseparable from the social and economic development that China has undergone till today. In a similar note, the academic career of such individual scholars as Wang Ning, according to Theo D’Haen, “parallel[s] that of China itself on the global scene” (cf. his essay in this issue). What’s more, Chinese scholars have become more and more self-confident, or to borrow Theo D’Haen again, “assertive,” in the international academic arena. The symptoms that have manifested in Chinese literary theories, literary criticism and critics themselves provide clues for metacritical analysis, for the sake of which another intercultural perspective would seem highly relevant and enlightening.

2. The Intricacies of Intercultural Interaction

So far, it has not been common for metacriticism to take into account intercultural

practices and experiences. Consequently, comparative literature, world literature and intercultural studies have been mostly out of focus in metacritical analysis. Thus, the articles in this column make a significant contribution to sorting out some intricacies in those areas through a cross-cultural (meta)commentary of Wang Ning's scholarship. Some of the major issues include: How should Chinese scholars respond to Western theories from a local perspective? In what ways will Chinese theories benefit from intercultural encounters with the West? What kinds of barriers would Chinese scholars have to be confronted with if they intend their scholarship to go global?

In *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000), Dipesh Chakrabarty questions the hegemony of European modernity discourse and proposes to revisit, revise and transform it from regional perspectives and for the sake of different regions, which will influence and shape theory-making in general. Apart from resistance to and deconstruction of West-centrism, as the debates around the so-called "imposed interpretation" have suggested, it is perhaps equally valuable to explore how Chinese issues and intellectual resources could affect the theoretical reconsiderations, which will hopefully be able to have universalism better integrated with exceptionalism. "[W]hat is happening to Western traditions of literary and cultural theory—and of critical thought more generally—as they encounter the overwhelming reality of China: the unrivalled depth and antiquity of its intellectual and cultural traditions; the sheer abundance of its human resources" (Mitchell and Wang 268). That scholars become more used to modes of thinking from intercultural perspectives, thanks to the increasing availability of academic dialogues and interactions, will be conducive to unexpected and promising process of theory-making as well as epistemological replenishment.

In the 20th century, the significance of the so-called "double Westernizations" should not be underestimated. In the literary arena, there have been successive waves of translating foreign literature into Chinese, among which such leading figures as Shakespeare, Ibsen, Goethe, Tolstoy and so on, have won the hearts of generations of readers in China. In the meantime, the scholarship about them in foreign languages, especially in their native languages or in English, is naturally regarded as useful and has also been introduced on a large scale, most of it via Chinese translation. Thus, how to react to such foreign academic resources turns out to be a matter of great importance. Some Chinese literary scholars have not just provided exemplary work by means of their own research, but also put forward critical concepts to instigate serious discussions, which would then resonate in literary circles. Such concepts as Ibsenization and Shakespearization, which Wang

Ning once elaborated on, proved to be quite necessary and inspiring, as both great authors have been actively introduced in China since the beginning of the 20th century, with Ibsen being exceptionally influential in the 1920s and 30s, not just acting as a catalyst for the women's liberation cause and the new culture movement in general, but also serving as a model for the birth of modern spoken drama.

When world literature became a heatedly debated topic at the turn of the 21st century, Chinese scholars enthusiastically took part in the discussions, in terms of publications, conferences as well as the newly established academic journals, either formally or informally as regularly serialized books. Their contributions have been highly recognized, exerting impact on the international academic discourse on world literature to an extent that has not been usually the case in the history of intercultural literary theory and criticism. In addition to a critique of the West-centric discourse of world literature by such Western scholars as Emily Apter and Pascale Casanova (*The World Republic of Letters*, 1999), Chinese scholars like Wang Ning put forward their own interpretations and conceptions of world literature(s), adopting pluralistic, diversified viewpoints to displace the centralized, totalizing, and undifferentiated ones. Drawing on localization strategies such as “world poetics” (Wang Ning) and “variation theory” (Cao Sunqing) in conceptualizing world literature, the Chinese theorization of world literature adds important intercultural perspectives to the field, which is aptly described as “Sinicizing World literature” (Theo D’Haen) or perhaps even better in Wang Ning’s words, “Chinese world literature.”

Similar to world literature, theorizing cosmopolitanism has also gone through a process of external rotation as it has been reconceptualized as rooted, vernacular, secular and so on. Being an active part of this academic chorus, Chinese explications of cosmopolitanism tend to draw from both classical thoughts and contemporary writings. The fact that the translated works of foreign authors in all disciplines have occupied such a prominent status in Chinese book market and among readers speaks volumes about the openness and cosmopolitan ethos in Chinese intellectual life. Having constantly been confronted by this worrisome situation, Wang Ning sadly exclaims, “[t]oday’s young Chinese readers admire Western thinkers and writers much more than their Chinese counterparts” (“Cosmopolitanism” 176). The problem does not lie in that young people should not read Western literature and theories; as a matter of fact, they should be encouraged to do so given that Chinese humanities are still in the process of making up for what got lost during the turbulent periods of modern Chinese history, including the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). What really matters is whether they can adopt a critical attitude and make reference to Chinese reality, usually in the form of localization.

Since the May-Fourth period, Marxism has been introduced, appropriated, and transformed to serve as a guide for the practices and theoretical innovations in China. Despite the ups and downs in social, political and economic development, Marxism is constantly requested to be associated with Chinese reality and thus has undergone a long and fruitful process of Sinification, of which Mao Zedong's thoughts became a convincing example. When stories of China's success in socialist cause in the aftermath of the establishment of new China reached some left-wing intellectuals in Europe, Mao Zedong's works began to be read and discussed with great enthusiasm among them, which yielded a huge impact on European intellectual and political lives. "Although Mao Zedong's thoughts on literature and art matured under the impact of Marxism, they have also undergone a reverse journey in the past few decades, namely from China to the world, thus realizing the globalization of Chinese Marxism [...] Mao Zedong's thoughts not only influenced French theorists like Althusser and Sartre, but also profoundly inspired feminist thinkers such as Beauvoir and Badiou" (Wang, "Translation" 4; translation mine). Another interesting turn in this transmission of global Marxism is that those Western thinkers, some of which visited and lectured in China, such as Sartre and Beauvoir, have been translated and created a big stir in Chinese intellectual life. This, indeed, serves as an example of so-called "glocalization," which Wang Ning has kept referring to in his writings.

Recently, it has become a common belief and concerted practice that Chinese scholarship would benefit from being introduced into the world, especially by means of translation into foreign languages under the governmental sponsorship. As Estok has pointed out in his essay earlier, there has been "an important emerging trend in Chinese literary scholarship—namely, a trend that aims toward a global readership and impacts." As a strong advocate for "worlding" Chinese literary and literary theory, Wang Ning attaches special emphasis to traditional thoughts like Confucianism and Daoism, which are once again credited with great potential for transforming global humanities. "We should, on the one hand, reconstruct traditional Confucianism from a postmodern and global perspective so that it becomes an important theoretical resource for building a harmonious society today. On the other hand, Western postmodern theories may be approached critically from the perspective of new Confucianism in an attempt to make it one of the important discursive forces in the current era of globalization, in which different civilizations co-exist and complement one another" (Wang, "Reconstructing" 77; translation mine) To be more specific, the Confucian concept of "unity of heaven and man" (tianren heyi) was revived by leading scholars of so-called "contemporary new

Confucianism,” such as Tang Yijie, Ji Xianlin and Tu Weiming, who helped to bridge the gap between humanities and science towards reinventing what I would call “new Confucian ecological humanism” (He 378).

Interculturalism, as proposed by Erika Fischer-Lichte and Rustom Barucha, may run risk of a totalizing understanding of cultures, without taking adequate consideration of the complexity, diversity, or even conflicts within what is usually presented as a culture. To introduce Chinese literature and culture to the West, as Estok explains in his essay, one should realize that there has been as much diversity in Western culture as in Chinese culture. The academic exchanges and interactions between China and the West do not just constitute a kind of competitive relationship, in which each side strives for greater influence or the central position. It is certainly undesirable to replace West-centrism with China-centrism, which is an obsolete mindset; instead, we should, through communications and interactions, foster the progress of human civilizations, and build an “academic community” (cf. Zou Li’s essay) based on equality and cooperation. Humanities, known for its usefulness of the useless, should better respond to the common challenges facing all mankind, such as the covid-19 pandemic threatening countless lives and the Ukrainian war tearing apart the international community. Regrettably, the world is currently clouded by divisions, misunderstandings and malicious attacks. Otherization, which is proceeding at all levels across different cultures, including governments, NGOs and civil society, is being further extended and upgraded by the mass media. In this regard, the West, which holds the right to speak and most of the material resources in this world, is endowed with a much greater responsibility, and should make more contributions, thus positively influencing the future of the global community.

3. Post-theory and Post-criticism in Action

In “Way of Post-Confucianism: Transformation and Genealogy” (2010), Zhuoyue Huang explicates new developments in Confucianism, which are responsive to major concerns in contemporary times, such as cultural conflicts and climate change. In this regard, “post-Confucianism” becomes a trendy term to denigrate what Tu Weiming in his book *Neo-Confucian Thought in Action: Wang Yang-Ming’s Youth* (1472-1509) had argued for, namely, the effectiveness of Confucianism in guiding social practice and empowering individual actions. In a similar vein, the various discussions in the name of post-theory or post-criticism are essentially not to deny the relevance of theory or criticism, though theory per se needs to be further interrogated as suggested by Galin Tihanov in his book *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory* (2019), but rather to reflect on the trajectory of theoretical

discussions to ponder on the possibilities that theory can and has to be made more useful and applicable in new and changing circumstances, especially under the condition of rapid technological and social developments.

Interestingly, what has been discussed under the name of “the ends of theory” leads to an interesting (re-)discovery that theory is actually very vibrant across disciplines and in those non-western places where the creativity in theory-making has not been fully recognized, especially by those residing in and occupying the so-called centers of critical theory in the West. As W. J. T. Mitchell and Wang Ning write after co-hosting an international conference on critical theory, “[f]ar from being dead or dying, theory in Beijing seemed at once exuberantly youthful in its energy and maturely modest in its goal of not only facilitating the exchange of ideas but patiently treating the very idea of exchange itself as an object of reflection and critique” (269). Such academic exchanges provided opportunities for Chinese scholars to make their voices heard by a much larger audience beyond China. “The advent of the ‘post-theoretic era’ enables the previously marginalized theoretical discourses to come to the forefront, which deconstructs a unified West-centric orthodoxy, so that scholars from small nations or non-Western cultures to engage in equal dialogues with their Western and international counterparts” (Wang, “On” 169; translation mine). Such Chinese theoretical concepts as world poetics put forward by Wang Ning has aroused critical attention both at home and abroad. In addition to cross-cultural exchanges, which should have taken place in a more efficient and productive manner, theory would also benefit from the developments in new directions of criticism, such as performativity studies, Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), post-humanism, new materialism and so on.

Notwithstanding its negative effects, science and technology have brought significant changes in our lives in terms of both the scale of influence and exceedingly rapid pace, which make some literary scholars worried about the decreasing influence of literature in public life. The so-called “end of literature,” as put forward by J. Hillis Miller, has triggered heated debates in literary circles, but its message may have been misinterpreted. “From what Zhu labels Miller’s subsequent ‘unpacking’ of Derrida’s passage, we see that Miller was not prophesying the end of literature as such but the end of the formal and informal influence that literature has exerted over the past two centuries on personal and public relations” (D’haen 310). With reference to Martha Nussbaum’s *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (1993) and *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997), Theo D’Haen suggests that literature in the digital era makes things happen differently than before. Other scholars like Fanco Morretti

embraced the digital era, and his theory of “distant reading” opened the way for more innovative experiments with literature and literary criticism. Technology is not just a tool, but rather constitutes an important shift in ontological paradigms, which would raise important questions for academic research. In “Medium Theory: Preface to the 2003 *Critical Inquiry* Symposium,” Mitchell says, “[i]t has been suggested that the rapid transformation in contemporary media (high-speed computing and the internet; the revolution in bio-technology; the latest mutations of speculative and finance capital) are producing new horizons for theoretical investigations in politics, science, the arts, and religion that go well beyond the resources of structuralism, poststructuralism, and the ‘theory of revolution’ of the late twentieth century” (330-331). The regime of relevance for science and technology expands to almost all aspects of culture, which is especially true during the current pandemic. It is estimated that in the post-pandemic era, new technology will no doubt become further, and more efficiently, integrated into our teaching and research. Under the call for new humanities, Chinese literary scholars seek opportunities to push for new modes of reading and interpretation, which would exert transformative power over theory-making now and in the future. “In today’s construction of modernization, is the so-called anthropocentrism still viewed as a sort of universal truth? Is man still the only rational species in the world? How shall we establish a new relationship between man and nature and between science and technology and humanities? These are what we should answer from the perspective of posthumanism” (Wang, “Rise” 9).

In *Use of Literatures* (2008) and *The Limits of Critique* (2015), Rita Felski explores how to do with literature and literary criticism with reference to Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), which advocates an association of diversified actors for the explication of literary works. With regard to world literature, the agency of institutions other than the usual literary actors has not been adequately acknowledged. Commenting on the reception of Japanese literature in the US in contrast with that of Chinese literature, David Damrosch writes the following in his published conversation with Wang Ning. “I think the modern Japanese fiction is more widely known in the United States than modern Chinese fiction. I do not know why Japanese became known, but I think there are enough market reasons, with some publishers such as Kodansha making a real push to have Japanese works translated and published in America. Also, generations ago there were a lot more contacts for cultural and political reasons particularly in the postwar era between Japan and the United States than between China and the United States” (Damrosch 188). Similarly, Casanova also argues that world literature is equally—

or perhaps more—a product of its mediators: translators, publishers, literary critics, teachers, government functionaries, and literary entrepreneurs. If literature does things in association with other actors in and outside of the literary arena, then perhaps it is also feasible to acknowledge that literary theory and criticism do not work independently but rather interactively with other related partners, no matter whether they are visible or not.

It is no coincidence that Thomas Beebee, in “Wang Ning, Inc.: Intercultural Collaboration in the Study of World Literature,” discusses how the different kinds of academic activities, such as hosting conferences, editing special issues, having interviews, that Wang Ning has been actively engaged with so far, have contributed to his success as an internationally recognized scholar and “a bridge” connecting academic circles across cultures. As an efficient and respectable organizer of academic events, Wang Ning represents what Beebee calls “corporate approach to literary and cultural investigations” (cf. Beebee’s essay in this issue), which not just yields valuable research work but also helps young scholars to grow and mature, especially in the areas of world literature and intercultural studies. In contrast with the micro perspective, Wang Ning’s academic career, as Theo D’Haen has argued, needs to be further situated in the historical development of Chinese economy, society and culture. Understandably, both micro and macro actors do not function independently but rather become intersected or interwoven, which would provide a more apt framework for metacritical analysis, whether it is Wang Ning or some other scholars, or critical theories.

It may indeed sound puzzling and awkward, as pointed out by Beebee, that in the academic works by Chinese authors or in Chinese there have been frequent references to and abundant discussions on Western sources, but insufficient attention has been given to academic works by other Chinese authors. Under this background, it is therefore highly appreciable that Wang Ning often refers to new contributions by his peers as well as some younger colleagues of his, and helps introduce them to international academia, which wins him a unique status among scholars young and old, and strengthens his academic leadership. What he has done not just provides convincing evidence of academic confidence, which is becoming more evident among Chinese scholars, but also a footnote for defining what good research may look like. Taking as an example Qian Zhongshu’s essay “詩可以怨” (“Our Sweetest Songs,” a translation by Zhang Longxi), Theo D’Haen comments, “Qian’s essay, while constituting a meaningful intervention on a national scale, is performing the same service on a global, ‘world literature’ scale, and doing so precisely in the service of China’s ‘national’ literature” (320). Literary studies with

sophistication and wisdom would enlighten readers from every corner of the earth, no matter East or West.

Epilogue

What can literature and literary criticism do in this digital era? To answer this question adequately requires the concerted efforts of scholars across disciplinary and cultural boundaries. Amid this new wave of literary theory and criticism, Chinese critics will not and should not be absent; instead, they remain highly motivated toward innovative research, in particular theory-making. As Theo D’Haen has noted in his metacritical response, academic work by Wang Ning and other Chinese scholars features “an ever-increasing confidence in China’s strengths, in its peculiarly ‘Chinese’ character” (311). What the “Chinese characteristics” may signify does not and should not have a clear definition. And it is not entirely a Chinese issue subject to what Chinese scholars have done and will do in their academic work, but rather a global issue that Chinese and non-Chinese would join hands in mapping its boundaries and portraying its distinctive features.

Along the stream of this thought, it is not of great pragmatic significance to be obsessed with the emergence of Chinese School on par with the established French School or Frankfurt School. It does not suffice to simply “impose” Western concepts on things Chinese, and vice versa. Rather, it may be feasible to focus on specific problems situated in local contexts but with global implications, build a solid foundation in theories and methodologies, be it Chinese or Western, and seek opportunities to have in-depth discussions across disciplines and cultures so as to take in different responses and critiques. To do so is by no means an easy job, but fortunately scholars like Wang Ning have paved the way.

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