

# Rebirth of the Phoenix: A New Lens on World Literature through Literary Thoughts

Jiang Hongxin & Peng Tianxiao

**Abstract:** In the information age, global geopolitical, economic, and cultural cleavages are intricate and multifaceted, with division and differentiation becoming increasingly prominent. Literary development faces numerous salient challenges, among which the fragmentation of cross-cultural understanding and entrenched Western-centric biases are particularly notable. Against this international backdrop, the cross-cultural nature of comparative literature provides an effective pathway to resolving these dilemmas. As an important methodological cornerstone in world literature studies, this disciplinary approach not only facilitates mutual understanding among diverse cultural subjects but also constructs a foundational interpretive framework for literary analysis. Based on this framework, this paper argues that literary thought research can function as a pivotal methodological tool for theoretical inquiry and a novel analytical lens for textual interpretation, thereby helping to address these challenges. Literary thought focuses on the ideological connotations, core principles, and contextual implications of literary works, with its core lying in a profound exploration of literature's ethos and cultural logic. This paper further elaborates on the specific application pathways of literary thought research in comparative literature studies, aiming to break through the limitations of existing research paradigms and foster equitable, in-depth cross-cultural dialogue centered on pluralistic coexistence in the global literary field.

**Keywords:** literary thought; comparative literature; world literature; cross-cultural dialogue; Chinese discourse

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**标题：**凤凰涅槃：文学思想新视角下的世界文学研究

**内容摘要：**在信息化时代，全球地缘政治、经济和文化领域分歧错综复杂，分裂与分化日益凸显。文学发展面临诸多显著挑战，其中跨文化理解的碎片化与根深蒂固的西方中心主义偏见尤为突出。在此国际背景下，比较文学的跨文化属性为破解这些困境提供了有效路径。作为世界文学研究的重要方法论基石，这一学科路径不仅促进多元主体间的相互理解，亦为文学分析构建起基础性阐释框架。本文基于这一框架提出，文学思想研究可作为理论探索的关键方法论工具与文本阐释的全新分析视角，进而助力应对上述挑战。文学思想聚焦文学作品的思想内涵、核心原则与语境意涵，其核心在于深度探析文学的精神特质与文化逻辑。本文进一步阐释文学思想研究在比较文学领域的具体应用路径，以期突破现有研究范式的局限，推动全球文学场域构建以多元共生为核心的平等且深入的跨文化对话。

**关键词：**文学思想；比较文学；世界文学；跨文化对话；中国话语

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In an era defined by global conflict, deepening divisions, and intertwined crises, the value of literature in shaping human understanding has become more critical than ever. To address the core issue of literature's contemporary significance, we first situate the discussion within a global landscape of profound contradictions, one that has grown increasingly intricate and fraught. Globalization has interconnected economies, cultures, and human destinies with unprecedented depth, yet it has simultaneously laid bare and amplified fault lines. Geopolitical tensions smolder and erupt across regions from the Middle East to Eastern Europe, displacing millions, shattering communities, and dampening the collective longing for peace. Economic volatility has widened the chasm between haves and have-nots, leaving vulnerable populations trapped in cycles of insecurity. Cultural misunderstandings, fueled by parochial narratives and sensationalized discourse, have calcified into deep-seated suspicion and hostility. Even digital spaces, once hailed as conduits for global connection, have devolved into echo chambers of disinformation, amplifying division and hardening ideological silos. In this era of cascading crises where conflict is normalized, otherness is weaponized, and dialogue grows ever rarer, a fundamental question presses upon us. What role can literature play in such a fractured world? Is it merely a form of escapism, a fleeting refuge from overwhelming realities? Or does it embody a more fundamental and indispensable function, one that comparative literature is uniquely positioned to fulfill?

This argument hinges on a concise yet incisive proposition. Literature

constitutes the study of humanity itself, a field known as the science of the human spirit. While literature does not directly resolve geopolitical conflicts or alleviate economic disparities, it fulfills a pivotal function by fostering intersubjective empathy, enabling individuals to recognize their shared essence in those they might otherwise regard as strangers. When engaging with novels from the Middle East, readers do not merely gain intellectual insight into distant strife but also experience emotional resonance with the fear of a child huddled in a bomb shelter, the hope of a family clinging to their homeland, and the resilience of a community striving to resist disintegration. Similarly, African poetry helps readers grasp the joy of harvest, the anguish of displacement, and the pride in cultural heritage that transcends national borders. In an era where social divisions are exacerbated by the construction of otherness, literature dismantles this narrative of estrangement, affirming Qian Zhongshu's timeless insight that "East and West share a common human heart-and-mind; so too, in the pursuit of truth, do Northern and Southern learning follow the same Way" (Qian 1).

Yet in this distinctly complex global context, comparative literature emerges not merely as a scholarly pursuit, but as a vital imperative. Unlike the passive consumption of individual literary works, comparative literature adopts a deliberate and systematic approach to cross-cultural engagement. It depicts and explores the human psyche, excavates the common threads of human experience across diverse literary traditions, interrogates the underlying roots of cultural misunderstanding, and builds vital bridges between seemingly disparate worlds. Its core mission aligns with the urgent need of our time, one that entails fostering harmony in a conflict-ridden globe, deepening mutual understanding among peoples, and facilitating genuine cultural exchange. Comparative literature does not shy away from such differences, but rather treats them as fertile ground for cross-cultural dialogue. It analyzes how different cultures articulate universal themes of love, loss, justice, and hope, and highlights the ways in which literary works reflect, challenge, and reconcile cultural divides. As scholars compare narratives of displacement in Asian diasporic fiction to their counterparts in Latin American magical realist novels or trace the resonant echoes of resistance poetry across African and Middle Eastern literatures, they not only expand academic knowledge but also vividly illuminate the inherent interconnectedness of human struggles and aspirations.

In a world torn apart by suspicion and division, comparative literature's role is irreplaceable. It counters the parochialism that fuels conflict by demonstrating that no culture holds a monopoly on truth or human experience. It transforms abstract notions of cultural exchange into tangible acts of understanding, as readers and

scholars engage with literature not as exotic curiosities but as windows into the lives of others. By centering dialogue over dogma and empathy over judgment, comparative literature embodies the very spirit of global citizenship that our fractured world so desperately needs. Qian Zhongshu's proposition that East and West share the same human heart underpins this endeavor, reminding us that beneath cultural differences lies a universal human nature and that comparative literature is the discipline illuminating this common ground.

In today's complex global landscape, comparative literature is not a luxury but a necessary force for fostering the mutual respect, understanding, and harmony essential to humanity's collective survival. Accordingly, this paper is organized into three sections.

## I. World Literature: Goethe to Marx, Western Centrism and Literary Thought as Path

Against this backdrop of fragmented cross-cultural understanding and entrenched Western-centric biases, both of which underscore the urgent need for authentic cross-cultural dialogue, we turn to the concept of world literature, a framework initially conceived to bridge cultural divides, even though it has long been hampered by unresolved tensions. Far from a contemporary innovation, its intellectual origins trace back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) first coined the term "Weltliteratur," a concept advocating cross-cultural exchange, to envision a space beyond provincialism. Goethe's vision was not a Eurocentric repository of great works, but a dynamic platform for dialogical exchange where Chinese poetry, Indian epics, and European dramas could engage on equal terms.

As Zhang Longxi observes in his monograph *World Literature as Discovery: Expanding the World Literary Canon*, Goethe's vision of world literature challenges cultural monopoly, arguing that "truth and beauty are not the monopoly of any single culture" (Zhang 25). On this basis, Zhang concludes that Goethe emphasized the integral role of non-Western traditions in global literary dialogue.<sup>1</sup> This inclusive ethos, rooted in the desire to foster mutual understanding across differences, directly aligns with the core need of the contemporary era, a need that remains unaddressed amid the fragmented cross-cultural landscape.

Decades later, this inclusive vision found expression in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), which argues that "the intellectual creations of individual nations

1 See Zhang Longxi, *World Literature as Discovery: Expanding the World Literary Canon*, London: Routledge, 2023, 25.

become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become increasingly impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature" (Marx and Engels 23). For Marx and Engels, world literature was not merely an aesthetic phenomenon, but a reflection of the economic base deeply intertwined with society's material circumstances. This connection was facilitated by the material infrastructure forged through intensified commodity exchange, which in turn enabled literary works to circulate across national borders and reflect the interconnectedness of human experiences transcending cultural and geographic divides. Together, Goethe's dialogical ideal and Marx's materialist framework laid the conceptual groundwork for a paradigm that might have addressed the very cross-cultural tensions we face today, yet its implementation soon veered off course.

Throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this inclusive conception was overshadowed by an exclusionary Western-centric hegemony. In academic and educational contexts, world literature became synonymous with the literary canons of Europe and North America, including William Shakespeare (1564-1616), Charles Dickens (1812-1870), Goethe himself, and Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), who were canonized as universal masters, while non-Western literary giants such as Li Bai (701-762), Du Fu (712-770), and Cao Xueqin (1715-1763) were marginalized as regional or exotic curiosities. This imbalance is stark in the realm of global literary literacy. Few Western students are familiar with Cao Xueqin's *A Dream of Red Mansions* or Luo Guanzhong's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, yet most Chinese high school students already know Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. This disparity is no accident. It arises from an epistemic and literary hegemony that imposes Western standards to define great literature, exacerbating the fragmented cross-cultural understanding that world literature was originally meant to overcome.

Scholars have long critiqued this hegemony. Zhang Longxi argues that "world literature should be understood not as a static museum of literary masterpieces, but as a dynamic process of discovery, a process that engages with works from all cultural traditions not in order to judge them by the norms and standards of the Western tradition, but to gain unique insights into common human concerns" (Zhang 4). While this critique constitutes a crucial intervention, it raises a fundamental and unresolved question. If world literature is truly a dynamic, dialogical process rather than a mere collection of texts, two interconnected challenges arise. Scholars must move beyond the superficial inclusion of non-Western works in a predominantly Western-centric framework. They must rethink the epistemological paradigms that

inform the study and valuation of literature to foster genuine cross-cultural dialogue.

These unresolved tensions between world literature's inclusive origins and its Western-centric practice, and between surface-level textual inclusion and deep-seated epistemological bias, underscore the urgent of a new methodological anchor. In response to these tensions, this paper advocates literary thought research as a pivotal approach to revitalize world literature. Unlike approaches that limit themselves to text comparison or canon expansion, literary thought research focuses on the core of cross-cultural understanding by delving into the ideological connotations, intrinsic essence, and cultural logic embedded in literary works, revealing the universal human aspirations, emotions, and reflections that transcend borders. By prioritizing the exploration of these intrinsic and ideological dimensions, literary thought research enables us to move beyond fragmented cultural perceptions and superficial exchanges. It captures the very essence of what world literature has always been meant to be, the dynamic process of discovery. This process not only engages with diverse literary traditions but also fosters genuine empathy, deepens mutual understanding, and connects people at the level of their innermost thoughts and experiences, ultimately addressing the pressing need for harmony and dialogue in our conflict-ridden world.

## II. Literary Thought: A New Lens for World Literature

In the context of enduring Western-centric hegemony in world literature studies, the search for an inclusive, systematic framework to break the academic impasse has grown increasingly imperative. This is where literary thought emerges not merely as a combination of literature and thought, but as a stance that rejects the perfunctory juxtaposition of the two and forges an intrinsic, cohesive synthesis that acts as a pioneering lens to reframe the dynamics of global literary interaction. It emphasizes the reciprocal construction between literary texts and their ideological contexts, rather than treating thought as an extrinsic add-on to literary analysis.

To appreciate the theoretical depth of this integrative framework, its conceptual lineage must be traced. A foundational moment was the pioneering shift toward historically and intellectually contextualizing literature, shifting scholarly focus beyond mere aesthetic appreciation. This methodological reorientation did not remain an isolated approach but was absorbed into the mainstream of literary scholarship, becoming formative for historicist criticism, the history of ideas, and later, comparative and cultural-critical approaches. The development of this contextual paradigm is evidenced by its enduring presence as a principal mode of inquiry across these fields. For instance, historicist criticism draws on this

orientation to interpret literary works through the prism of their historical and ideological backgrounds, while comparative literature extends it to cross-cultural ideological dialogue.

This very paradigm provides the critical lens for the central debate in contemporary Chinese academia on literature and thought. As noted, “The relationship between literature and thought constitutes a noteworthy research topic in Chinese academia since the new century” (Jiang, “Introduction” 1). Proponents from the ideological circle argue that contemporary Chinese literature is alienated from social reality and lacks ideological depth, and consequently maintain that it fails to reflect on existential circumstances, the meaning of life, and ultimate values. In contrast, the literary circle challenges these evaluations as overly simplistic, noting that they stem from hasty judgments based on inadequate engagement with literary works.<sup>1</sup> “Superior literature necessarily represents a synthesis of individual life experiences and social contexts, reflecting not only an artistic world constructed by various literary techniques but also the connections to its era, history, and the destiny of humanity” (1). This irreducible conflict underscores the imperative of rigorous inquiry into literary thought itself.

To illustrate how this framework operates in practice and addresses the need for depth, the thought of two pivotal 20<sup>th</sup>-century literary figures is exemplary. The first is T. S. Eliot (1888-1965). As René Wellek observed, “Eliot was, in the English-speaking world, the paramount critic of the twentieth century, who obviously shaped the taste of his age” (Wellek 176). Central to his influence was a reconceptualization of literary tradition. For Eliot, tradition was not a static canon but an organic and dynamic conversation between past and present. In this conversation, each new work responds to and reshapes its predecessors. This vision is elaborated on in his seminal essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”<sup>2</sup> This reimagining required the poet to possess historical consciousness while forging a modern path. Furthermore, Eliot insisted that literature be studied within its moral, religious, and cultural contexts, viewing creation and criticism as inseparable, like two wings of a bird. His own work epitomizes this integration. The critical ideas animating his essays are embodied in the poetic vision of *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, just as his criticism provides the key to understanding his poetry. This profound synthesis remains rare in traditional literary studies.

1 See Jiang Hongxin, “Introduction,” *A Study of T.S. Eliot’s Literary Thought*, Beijing: People’s Literature Publishing House, 2021, 1.

2 See T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *Selected Essays*, London: Faber & Faber, 1951, 13-22.

While Eliot sought to revitalize the literary tradition from within, Ezra Pound (1885-1972) turned decisively outward, finding in Chinese literary thought a critical mirror and remedy for Western modernity. For Pound, Chinese literary thought held significance on two interconnected levels. It carried inherent aesthetic merit, and it offered a unique therapeutic dimension that he believed could address the cultural and spiritual crises of Western society in his time. Pound maintained that this therapeutic dimension stemmed from his perception that early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Western society was plagued by a malady characterized by moral emptiness, economic injustice, and above all the scourge of usury, as well as alienation from tradition, and that Chinese literature provided a remedy for this societal affliction. He argued that Confucianism's emphasis on a virtue-based social order, the brevity of Chinese poetry and its focus on concrete experience, and Daoism's notion of harmony with nature formed the core ideas to help Western society rediscover its moral compass. Ultimately, Pound's oeuvre stands as a testament to world literature's potential as an exchange rooted in mutual engagement rather than unidirectional Western-to-Eastern dissemination, as he did not appropriate Chinese literature but engaged deeply with it, derived insights, and applied them to addressing his era's cultural predicaments.

This cross-cultural dialogue, exemplified by Pound, underscores a core principle for world literature. Literary thought enables engagement with non-Western literatures on their own inherent terms. When studying a Chinese poem by Du Fu, scholars do not merely examine formal properties or historical backdrop, but explore the underlying literary thought, including Confucian notions of harmony and moral duty, Daoist reverence for nature, and the poet's dedication to bearing witness to human suffering. When reading Gabriel García Márquez's (1927-2014) *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, scholars do not merely focus on magic realism as a literary genre, but engage with the core literary thought such as colonialism critique, indigenous culture affirmation, and the conviction that storytelling is a form of resistance. In essence, literary thought is the key to unveiling world literature's full richness, not as a collection of exotic texts but as a global dialogue on what it means to be human.

To expound on this significance for world literature, it is essential to clarify the core meaning and structural framework of literary thought. Literary thought is "not a superficial combination but an inherent and organic integration of literature and thought" (Jiang, "General Prologue" iv). It is centrally manifested in the "contemplation and articulation of major issues concerning literature, such as its essence, mission, value, and connotations" (iv). Specifically, literary thought

encompasses three dimensions. Ideas within literary works are intuitive expressions of writers' concepts in the creative process. Ideas about literature refer to epochal literary concepts and ideological consciousness encompassing both critical and creative practices across historical periods. Ideas related to literature, closely linked to sociocultural trends and philosophical thoughts, bear distinct literary value orientations exerting profound impacts on contemporary literary composition.<sup>1</sup> In addition, this three-dimensional framework aligns with the earlier assertion that literary thought "reflects the political, economic, cultural, and historical contexts of a specific period in a society and is deeply shaped by these factors" (iv).

Rather than delineating the structural dimensions of literary thought, Min Ze traces its generative process in *History of Chinese Literary Thought*. He posits that beyond sociocultural contexts, this process unfolds through two complementary modalities. One is indirect literary thought, namely that founded in literary creation. The other is direct literary thought, namely that embodied in literary criticism. Literary criticism facilitates the dynamic interplay between these two forms. Their convergence constitutes "a mighty torrent of literary thought endowed with distinctive national aesthetic characteristics" (Min 8). Min further clarifies that while indirect literary thought emerges prior to direct literary thought in temporal logic, the two become intertwined once literary creation evolves into a conscious subjective activity and object of criticism. They mutually reinforce and illuminate each other to drive the development of literary thought.<sup>2</sup>

### **III. Building a Chinese Discourse on World Literature: Unity in Diversity**

As literary thought offers a new inclusive lens for world literature studies, it raises a critical question for Chinese scholars, specifically the role we should play in reshaping global literary discourse. The answer lies in embracing a distinct responsibility and unique opportunity to contribute to a more equitable academic landscape, one that breaks free from long-standing Western-centric biases without slipping into narrow cultural chauvinism. Scholars must draw deeply from China's millennia-old literary traditions, from classical poetry to modern prose, while engaging openly and equally with the literary heritage of other nations. The goal is to forge a Chinese discourse on world literature established on cultural self-confidence yet committed to global mutual learning. This perspective directly addresses the structural imbalance in Western-centric world literature, stressing the

1 See Jiang Hongxin, "General Prologue," *20<sup>th</sup>-Century American Literary Thought*, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2023, iv.

2 See Min Ze, *History of Chinese Literary Thought*, Changsha: Hunan Education Publishing House, 2004, 8.

urgency of Chinese scholars' participation grounded in China's literary traditions in reshaping global literary discourse.

This discourse need not be opposed to Western literary discourse but instead should serve as an integral and distinctive component of the diverse global literary landscape, offering complementary perspectives that enrich collective academic understanding. It rejects both the hegemony of Western-centric discourse and the narrowness of cultural isolationism, aiming to build a platform for equal dialogue where Chinese literary traditions and Western literary insights can interact and illuminate each other.

To translate this vision into reality, the construction of Chinese discourse is anchored in three core principles that deepen progressively.

First, it positions mutual learning between Eastern and Western traditions as the foundational premise of inclusive discourse. China's literary traditions have never existed in isolation, for they have been nourished by cross-cultural exchange for centuries. This is amply evidenced by two key historical developments. Buddhism was introduced to China during the Han Dynasty (206BC-AD220), reshaping Chinese poetic imagery and the philosophical underpinnings of literary creation. The integration of Buddhist emptiness by Wang Wei (701-761) into his landscape verses stands as a vivid example of this transformation. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a wave of translations brought Western literature to China, spanning the moral idealism of Tolstoy (1828-1910) to the social critique of Ibsen (1828-1906). This literary exchange inspired modern Chinese writers like Lu Xun (1881-1936) to reimagine literature as a tool for societal reflection and renewal. This tradition of dynamic learning must be sustained today. Scholars can draw on T.S. Eliot's vision of literary tradition as an organic whole that evolves through dialogue, Ezra Pound's rigorous engagement with classical Chinese poetry evident in his collection *Cathay*, and Zhang Longxi's cross-cultural hermeneutics that advocates understanding without conflation. Furthermore, Chinese scholars should actively disseminate China's indigenous literary thoughts globally. These include the Confucian concept of harmony without uniformity, a principle that underscores respect for differences, as well as the Daoist notion of *wu-wei* (inaction), which is often interpreted as effortless alignment with natural order rather than rigid imposition of will. It encourages humility in interpreting foreign literatures by advocating non-coercive engagement with other traditions, and the Confucian poetic function of inspiring, observing, uniting, and criticizing, an idea that links literary expression to social engagement. These ideas, grounded in China's cultural heritage, offer vital insights for world literature studies, reminding scholars to honor diverse traditions instead of

imposing a singular standard. This cross-cultural mutual learning, refined by history, lays a solid foundation for the practical implementation of the Chinese discourse on world literature.

Second, it centers on understanding and communication as the practical pathway to bridging divides. Literary studies have frequently fallen into jargon-laden insularity, catering exclusively to academic circles and becoming disconnected from the broader public, yet literature's greatest power lies in fostering empathy across boundaries. To reverse this, scholars must reshape literary education to prioritize empathic engagement. They should guide students not only to analyze textual techniques but also to engage with narratives, recognize the hopes and struggles of others, and find reflections of their own humanity. For example, scholars can highlight shared themes of cultural upheaval and resilience that transcend geographical divides by teaching Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* alongside Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Beyond the classroom, scholars must amplify marginalized voices through collaborative research projects, bilingual translation initiatives, and academic forums centered on non-Western narratives. These voices include those of scholars from developing countries, African diaspora writers, and other readers whose perspectives have long been overlooked. To bridge academic and public spheres, insights from literary studies should also be communicated through community lectures, accessible media essays, and cross-cultural book clubs that invite diverse readers to engage with works that bridge cultures. By breaking down barriers through understanding and communication, these practical efforts pave the way for the ultimate goal of equitable literary discourse.

Most crucially, it advocates rejecting cultural hegemony and affirming equal value as the ultimate goal of Chinese discourse. Scholars must challenge the notion that any single culture holds a monopoly over literary truth or aesthetic value. The goal is not to replace Western hegemony with another form of dominance but to cultivate a world literature paradigm that acknowledges the equal worth of all traditions. Such a paradigm would place Li Bai's lyrical freedom alongside Shakespeare's dramatic depth, the theme of righteous quest in *Journey to the West* alongside the exploration of identity in *Pride and Prejudice*, and ensure the literary thoughts of every culture, such as African oral epics and Latin American magical realism, receive the respect they deserve. It also means rejecting simplistic dichotomies, recognizing that Chinese discourse is not a monolith but a dynamic perspective that engages in critical dialogue with both Chinese and foreign literary traditions, avoiding both uncritical admiration of the West and narrow cultural exclusivity. This commitment to equal cultural worth and dynamic dialogue thus

paves the way for a paradigm transformation which resonates with the metaphor of phoenix rebirth at the heart of global literary studies' renewal.

## Conclusion

In many cultures, the phoenix is a symbol of renewal, of rising from the ashes to start afresh. Today, our world is in great need of such a rebirth of empathy, dialogue, and unity in diversity. Literary thought is the fire that will fuel this rebirth, and the Chinese discourse on world literature is poised to contribute to this collective renewal through its commitment to mutual learning and equal respect. As we advocate for the equal value of all literary traditions, we hope to foster a global literary circle where differences are honored and dialogues are sincere. Literature, in this vision, truly becomes a bridge connecting humankind's shared aspirations, thereby helping to build a community with a shared future for humanity.

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