

The Place of History in Wang Shouren's Writings on Foreign Literature

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Abstract: Over the course of his distinguished career, Wang Shouren has published on a wide range of subjects, from traditional literary criticism to reflections on the place of literary studies in China and the rest of the world. Much of his work has drawn on insights from a range of cognate fields, not least from history. This article discusses the role of history in Wang Shouren's writings, focusing mainly on his English-language works. The article begins by discussing his use of biographical analysis to explicate literary works, before moving on to explore his use of literary genealogy to throw light on nineteenth-century English unacted drama. The article then analyses how Wang Shouren's literary scholarship has drawn on cultural history, and it concludes by explaining how he has applied historical and literary knowledge to provide insights into contemporary social and political issues. Overall, the article provides a glimpse into a richly impressive scholarly career which has contributed a great deal to the study of literature both in China and around the world.

Keywords: Foreign Literature; Chinese humanities; English and History; interdisciplinarity

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标题: 历史在王守仁外国文学研究中的地位

内容摘要: 王守仁的教学与科研成就斐然，其研究领域广泛，不仅涉及传统的文学批评，还包含了对中国和世界各地文学研究地位的思考。他的著述涵盖诸多主题。他的许多学术成果汲取认知场域各学科的深刻见解，其中特别重要的就是历史。本文基于王守仁的英文论著，论述历史在其文学研究中的作用。首先讨论他采用作家生平传记分析来阐释文学作品，然后探讨文学谱系对于19世纪英国剧诗研究的应用，接着分析他借鉴文化史开展文学研究，最后阐释他利用历史和文学知识，提供对当代社会和政治问题的洞见。总体而言，本文管窥王守仁令人印象深刻的学术生涯，展示他为中国和世界的文学

研究做出的重要贡献。

关键词：外国文学；中国人文学科；英语和历史；跨学科性

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Professor Wang Shouren received his BA degree in English from Nanjing University in 1983 and obtained his MA and PhD degrees from the University of London in 1985 and 1988. Pursuing advanced study at an elite university in the United Kingdom was a very rare path for a Chinese scholar to take at the time.¹ At London, he received rigorous training in traditionalist literary studies under the supervision of John Woolford, a notable expert on Robert Browning. Throughout his subsequent successful and productive career at Nanjing University, Wang Shouren has authored numerous groundbreaking books and articles. Rather than allowing himself to be confined to a narrow specialism, Wang Shouren has had a wide range of scholarly interests, publishing on themes as diverse as British poetry and literary criticism; American realism; Chinese mythorealism; translation studies; literature and cognition; language learning; and much more besides. When he returned to China in 1990, he decided that he could make a greater contribution to the academy and to society by publishing predominantly in Chinese.

Still, Wang Shouren continued to publish in English too, and this article focuses in particular on his English-language writings. In the 1990s, China and the USA were in a honeymoon phase, and the study of American literature in China was rather underdeveloped. Wang Shouren helped to remedy this situation by serving as co-editor for the Chinese-language *Literary History of the United States* in four volumes, published with Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press in 2002. Due to the success of this project, he was then invited to coedit the five-volume work *A History of Twentieth-Century Foreign Literature*, published with Yilin Press in 2004. These monumental works illustrate the ever-broadening perspective of his career as a scholar and teacher. The present article cannot hope to do full justice to the range and depth of Wang Shouren's scholarship. Rather, it focuses on a single thread that can be found woven throughout many of his works, namely the application of historical insights to the study of literature. It is divided into four sections, each of which approaches the main topic from a different angle. The first section discusses Wang Shouren's use of biographical analysis to explicate literary

1 It was noted that he was "the first Chinese Ph.D. in English from the University of London." See David Simpson, "Recent Studies in the Nineteenth Century," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 4 (1990): 732.

works, particularly in his early work on Henry David Thoreau. The second section examines his use of literary genealogy in his pioneering work on nineteenth-century unacted drama. The third section analyses how Wang Shouren's literary scholarship has drawn on insights from cultural history. The fourth and final section explains how Wang Shouren has applied his knowledge of history and literature to provide insights into contemporary social and political issues. Overall, a picture emerges of a richly impressive scholarly career, along with the conviction that Wang Shouren has made exceptional contributions to the study of literature both in China and around the world.

Wang Shouren's Application of Biographical Insights to the Study of Literature

Biography was a form of writing familiar to the ancients, from Ancient Greece and Rome to Han China. In England, the modern conception of biography is largely a product of the eighteenth century, though biographical writing can be traced much further back. One thinks, for example, of the written 'lives' of eminent statesmen such as Thomas More and Cardinal Wolsey that were produced in the sixteenth century. Wang Shouren has long maintained that biography is a form of historical writing that is indispensable to literary scholarship. In an article published in 2021, he argued that biography "has its nature in both history and literature" (Wang, "Pearl S. Buck Talks About Her Parents" 197). The classification of biography as a form of literature is uncontroversial. Similarly, most would agree that a knowledge of biography contributes immeasurably to the study of literature. The relevance of biography to literary criticism has only ever been seriously challenged by the New Critics, who enjoyed their high point of influence in the 1940s, but even the New Critics admitted that biography cannot be wholly dispensed with.¹ However, some scholars have questioned the extent to which biography also has a historical nature. In 1911, Sidney Lee, the eminent editor of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, claimed that biography should be independent of history.² One assumes that Lee meant to say that biography should be independent of political history as it was understood in the early twentieth century. Otherwise, it would be a strange claim. Wang Shouren's practical and common-sense view is surely correct: biography, after all, is nothing more or less than the history of an individual. This fact is nicely encapsulated in the words of the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which defines biography as "that form of history which is applied, not to races or masses of men, but to an individual" (Gosse 952).

1 See Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947.

2 See Sidney Lee, *Principles of Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911.

The application of biographical knowledge to the study of literature is a thread that is woven throughout Wang Shouren's entire career, and it well illustrates his practical and fact-based approach to literature. Wang Shouren's earliest contributions to literary scholarship already demonstrated a tendency to make productive use of insights drawn from biographical study. In his first published article on American literature in English, "Thoreau and Confucianism," Wang Shouren made a convincing case for the influence of traditional Confucian thought on the writings of Henry David Thoreau. Earlier scholars had downplayed the Chinese influence, emphasizing instead that Thoreau acquired his fondness for asceticism, meditation and isolation from Indian philosophy and religion. As Wang Shouren pointed out, Thoreau's belief in the virtue of simplicity has just as important parallels in the Chinese as in the Indian tradition. For example, "Confucius attaches great importance to the simple mode of life because he believes that one does not live in order to eat but eats in order to live" (Wang, "Thoreau and Confucianism" 38). Thoreau was a reader of the Chinese as well as the Indian classics. He quoted from Chinese sources quite extensively. In *Walden*, there is a story (from the *Daxue*) about King Tang, who founded the Tang Dynasty in around 1600 B.C.: "They say that characters were engraven on the bathing tub of king Tching-thang to this effect: 'Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again'" (Thoreau 63). Thoreau used this story to illustrate the importance of renewing one's life of simplicity each day—never mind the original meaning of the injunction, that the emperor should renew himself in virtue each day to remain worthy of the Mandate of Heaven.¹ A writer can quote from a work without being really influenced by it. However, Wang Shouren supports his argument with a further observation: Thoreau did not spend his entire life in quiet reflection, but was socially and politically engaged. Even during his famous two-year stay at Walden Pond, he found time to oppose the Mexican—American War (1846-1848). His intervention in the affairs of the world harmonized with the teachings of Confucius, who argued that philosophers ought to engage with human society and concern themselves with human welfare. They should take a full share of the problems and blessings of society, not lock themselves away like anchorites.²

Wang Shouren's argument received additional empirical confirmation in 1993, when Hongbo Tan presented his discovery of a notebook in Thoreau's hand containing twenty-three pages of translations from the Confucian Four Books,

1 See Lyman V. Cady, "Thoreau's Quotations from the Confucian Books in Walden," *American Literature* 1 (1961): 20-32.

2 See Wang Shouren, "Thoreau and Confucianism," *Journal of Foreign Languages* 2 (1988): 37-40+67.

translated from French to English by Thoreau himself. This finding showed that Thoreau had been more intellectually engaged with Chinese writings than was previously known.¹ More recently, Mathew A. Foust has revisited the subject of Chinese influence on Thoreau's philosophy, lamenting that this influence is often still downplayed despite much evidence to the contrary.² Wang Shouren was certainly right to observe that the virtue of simplicity, so beloved of Thoreau, is fundamental to much traditional Chinese thought. In *The Importance of Living* (1920), the celebrated writer Lin Yutang argued that simplicity was one of the essential qualities, not only of Chinese culture but also of life itself:

Speaking as a Chinese, I do not think that any civilization can be called complete until it has progressed from sophistication to unsophistication, and made a conscious return to simplicity of thinking and living[...]Surveying Chinese literature, art and philosophy as a whole, it has become quite clear to me that the philosophy of a wise disenchantment and a hearty enjoyment of life is their common message and teaching—the most constant, the most characteristic and most persistent refrain of Chinese thought. (Lin, *Importance of Living* 12)

A better summary of the ideal scholarly attitude can hardly be imagined: knowing, not cynical; otherworldly, and yet part of society; discerning, and yet able to enjoy life's simple pleasures.

In an article published in 2013, Wang Shouren reemphasized the Chinese influence on American transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau, as well as on other authors such as Allen Ginsberg. In this article, he observes that cross-cultural encounters go both ways: Chinese culture has influenced Western literature, and Western literature has influenced modern Chinese culture. This is a win-win situation that enriches the culture of the whole world. As he puts it, “[t]he translation, transmission and reception of foreign literature are closely related to China’s modernization drive, and to the development of Chinese modern literature and culture” (Wang, “Teaching and Study of American Literature” 272-273). He cites some interesting examples of this phenomenon in practice, including the fact that Lu Xun avowedly drew political and literary inspiration from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. As he observes, American literature was not taught in

1 See Tan Hongbo, “Confucius at Walden Pond: Thoreau’s Unpublished Confucian Translations,” *Studies in the American Renaissance* May (1993): 275-303.

2 See Matthew A. Foust, *Confucianism and American Philosophy*. Albany: SUNY University Press, 2017.

Chinese universities until the 1980s, whereas today it is a compulsory component of English degrees. He notes that, over the course of his career, no less than 20 of his PhD students have chosen to focus on American literature, and he suggests that Chinese students know more about American literature than American students know about Chinese literature—a claim which is almost certainly true, though indeed regrettable.¹ It is ironic, in the era of a supposed “global turn” in literary studies, that most Western students are not afforded the opportunity to study *Outlaws of the Marsh*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, or many other characteristic works of Chinese literature. But to leave that aside for now, we can say that Wang Shouren has set an excellent example in establishing a dialogue between Western and Eastern literature and scholarship, always a productive line of enquiry, and one which has interested him throughout his whole career. More importantly, they demonstrate Wang Shouren’s understanding of the value of biographical analysis to the study of literature.

Wang Shouren’s Use of Literary Genealogy to Explicate Literary Works

Another form of historical analysis on which literary scholars depend, and of which Wang Shouren has made particularly effective use, is genealogy: that is, tracing the origin and development of ideas, forms and genres. This procedure is stock-in-trade for literary scholars and historians of ideas alike, as Wang Shouren’s work makes abundantly clear. A good case study is provided by Wang Shouren’s research on unacted drama. His PhD degree was awarded in 1988, and he published an article based on one of his thesis chapters in the same year.² In 1990, he published a monograph based on the thesis, entitled *The Theatre of the Mind: A Study of Unacted Drama in Nineteenth-Century England*. This book is a sympathetic study of drama that was never designed to be acted on the stage. Wang Shouren describes this type of genre as “unacted drama” rather than “closet drama”; both terms were in use by the nineteenth century.³ The first unacted dramas in England were written in the sixteenth century, such as Samuel Daniel’s rather dull five-act poem *Cleopatra* (1594). A famous early example is Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* (1671). Unacted

1 See Wang Shouren, “Teaching and Study of American Literature in Nanjing,” *A Binational Conversation on Bridging Cultures: The Context: Place, People, History*, edited by Jia Leilei, Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 2013, 272-276.

2 See Wang Shouren, “Robert Browning’s Problems with Unacted Drama,” *Studies in Browning and His Circle* 16 (1988): 52-71.

3 See F. G. Tomlins, *The Relative Value of the Acted and the Unacted Drama: A Lecture*, London: C. Mitchell, 1841; Anon, “Byron’s Deformed Transformed,” *The British Critic*, New Ser., 22 (1824): 403-414.

drama reached its highest point of success in the nineteenth century, a fact which Wang Shouren attributed to a range of historical causes, including a widespread belief in the overriding importance of dramatic character, as opposed to plot; the decay and vulgarization of the English theatre; and, most importantly, the rise of romantic expressive poetry.¹

Wang Shouren identified Goethe's *Faust* (of which the first part was finished in 1801 and published in 1808) as the most important model for the English unacted drama of the nineteenth century: "The success of *Faust* as an unacted drama promoted the popularity of the form[...] In many ways, *Faust* was the progenitor of unacted drama" (Wang, *Theatre of the Mind* xiv). He was certainly right to emphasize the importance of Goethe as an exemplar. Goethe himself gave considerable thought to the differences between acted and unacted drama, as illustrated by a comment he made in conversation with friends in 1829: "Things may be very pretty to read, and very pretty to think about; but as soon as they are put upon the stage the effect is quite different, and that which has charmed us in the closet will probably fall flat on the boards" (Eckermann 362). Like many of the English unacted dramas, *Faust* is deliberately lacking in action—except for a few memorable scenes, such as the wine springing from the tables in Auerbach's Cellar—and instead replete with abstruse metaphysics, lyricism and introspection. Philip Hobsbawm, who served as external examiner of the original thesis, commended Wang Shouren for going beyond "source-hunting" and instead establishing the English poets' debts to Goethe in a more sophisticated manner: "These references are not merely source-hunting but a successful attempt to show that Byron's interests and predilections make for the creation of this curious form, the unacted drama." Hobsbawm also commended the author's "down-to-earth" style and his tendency "towards the no-nonsense stand of the empirical philosopher."

Wang Shouren began *Theatre of the Mind* with an analysis of Lord Byron's unacted dramas *Manfred* (1817), *Marino Faliero* (1820) and *The Two Foscari* (1821), paying the most attention to *Manfred*. *Manfred*, a dark play that explores the guilty conscience of an incestuous count, was not staged until 1834, a decade after Byron's death. Wang Shouren challenged the opinion, commonplace in the nineteenth century, that Byron was determined to prevent his plays being staged because he feared popular ridicule, attributing his attitude more plausibly to his aristocratic temperament and also to the decline of the theatre, which made it an unattractive venue for a man with high literary pretensions. This was another

1 See Wang Shouren, *The Theatre of the Mind: A Study of Unacted Drama in Nineteenth-Century England*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990.

successful application of the biographical approach which I outlined in the first section. As Wang Shouren well observed, *Manfred* is deeply indebted to *Faust* in form, style and content. Goethe himself remarked upon this fact in a 1920 article praising *Manfred*: “This singular but highly gifted poet has absorbed my own *Faust* into himself[...] Those motives and ideas which suited his purposes he has made use of, but in his own original way, so that everything seems different” (Goethe, “Byron’s *Manfred*” 202). Compare, for instance, the imperiousness with which both Faust and Manfred speak to spirits and devils:

Damnable villain, go your cursèd ways,
Nor dare to speak that lovely creature’s name. (Goethe, *Faust* 148)
Ye mock me—but the power which brought ye here
Hath made you mine. Slaves, scoff not at my will!(Byron, *Manfred* 14)

Wang Shouren followed up his readings of Byron with detailed analyses of unacted dramas by Percy Bysshe Shelley, Robert Browning, Arthur Hugh Clough, Matthew Arnold, Algernon Charles Swinburne and Thomas Hardy, concluding with an analysis of Hardy’s epic drama *The Dynasts* (1903-1908). *The Theatre of the Mind* was praised by reviewers for its comprehensiveness.¹ Its enduring influence is clear from the fact that it is still widely cited today.

Wang Shouren’s Analysis of Intersections between Cultural History and Literature

Wang Shouren’s scholarship has also expertly drawn on cultural history in order to shed light on literary works. The value of cultural history for students of literature has been recognized by a variety of schools of thought, including new historicism and, in the UK, cultural materialism (new historicism’s poor relation). The new historicism originated in the writings of Stephen Greenblatt and his associates in the 1980s and reached quite extraordinary levels of academic influence in the 1990s. Even the inventors of new historicism were bewildered when they looked at university job boards in the USA and saw English departments suddenly clamoring to hire new historicists.² The fundamental claim of the new historicism was that literary works

1 See Felicia Hardison Londré, “Virtual Theatre from Diderot to Mallarmé [by] Evelyn Gould; A Mental Theater: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age [by] Alan Richardson; The Theatre of the Mind: A Study of Unacted Drama in Nineteenth Century England [by] Shou-ren Wang,” *Nineteenth Century Theatre* 1 (1993): 50-55.

2 See Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practising New Historicism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

are embedded in the social and cultural contexts of their time—hardly a novel or surprising insight—though this main claim was itself embedded in many thousands of pages of clever theory. Though Wang Shouren would no doubt acknowledge the innovative nature of the new historicism, he never became a new historicist. He shared some interests with the practitioners of this movement, including as a curiosity about the intersections between cultural history and literature, but he retained his fundamentally practical approach to the study of literature, and he never embraced the new historicists' complex (and arguably abstruse) doctrines.

One example of Wang Shouren's independent approach to this subject is an article he published in 1996 in the Chinese journal *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, entitled "Automobiles and American Fiction of the 1950s." In this piece, he began by describing the burgeoning American car industry in the 1950s. Noting that cars are the paramount symbol of industrial society, he argued that car ownership had a great influence on American individualistic culture. Wang Shouren then discussed the role of automobiles in four classic American novels: J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960). He pointed out that in each of these novels the automobile serves as a symbol of escape or freedom. Whereas Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn whiled away the time by rafting down the Mississippi, Holden Caulfield "drifts around by car" (Wang, "Automobiles and American Fiction" 113); and in *On the Road*, the automobile typifies the desire for escape that characterized the Beat Generation.

The most notable fact about the methodology of this article is that it is based on a practical foundation. Rather than getting drawn into grand-scale theories, Wang Shouren relies on common-sense reasoning, traditional literary analysis and historical facts. For example, in order to provide background information to the close readings of the literary texts, he cites figures to illustrate the increase in car ownership between the 1920s and 1960s, as well as the proliferation of roadbuilding in the 1940s and 1950s. That is not to say that the article is all facts and figures; Wang Shouren still found space for more philosophical reflections. For example, he makes the following observation:

Traveling by air, rail, and sea is a collective behavior: passengers share the same destination and are classified into different classes. By contrast, as a private behavior, traveling by car enables people to decide their own routes and does not assume the hierarchical pattern. Automobiles give rise to a mobile and dynamic civilization, creating a spatial experience of illusionary absolute

freedom[...] (Wang, “Automobiles and American Fiction” 112)

Here, the author clearly grasps the profound implications of his discussion. Transport is not just a way of getting around: it shapes society itself. Collective transport methods can give rise to collectivist thinking and culture, and the same is true of more individualistic methods of transport. Technology shapes human behavior, just as human behavior shapes technology. This insight helps him to cast new light on the literary texts under discussion. More importantly, the article sets the reader thinking about other examples in which technology can influence social and cultural behavior. Could Wang Shouren’s comments on the social implications of transport also be applied to architecture, for example, or media? In summary, this article effectively demonstrates the fruitful interchange that can exist between literary scholarship and cultural history, especially when scholars begin from a practical foundation.

Similarly insightful on this score were Wang Shouren’s recent contributions to a 2021 special issue of the journal *Orbis Litterarum*, entitled *Realism in the Post-Truth Era*. This special issue, edited by Wang Shouren and featuring contributions from scholars from around the world, was a culmination of his long-held interest in the subject of realism. He has published many books and articles in Chinese on this subject, including the 2019 edited collection *Representation and Reproduction: Literary Realisms Across the Boundaries*, published by Nanjing University Press. In the introduction to the special issue, he established the theoretical foundations of the volume: in the modern world, “when rational thinking is often substituted by emotions; or when rational thinking does exist, it is easy to succumb to the power of influence or manipulation” (Wang, “Introduction: Realism in the Post-truth Era” 155). He expressed an interest, above all, in exploring how various forms of literary realism have responded—and still are responding—to the challenges of an environment in which truth and reality are contested. This theme has a cultural historical component because it also takes into account the historical conditions in which realist literature flourished in its classic, nineteenth-century form.

Wang Shouren contributed an article to the special issue himself, cowritten with the Nanjing University scholar Liu Yang, entitled “Mythology, History, and Reality: Mythorealism in Yan Lianke’s *The Explosion Chronicles*.” Born in Henan Province in 1958, Yan Lianke is one of China’s foremost living novelists. *The Explosion Chronicles* (2013), longlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2017, is a satirical novel which charts the meteoric rise of a town called Explosion in the post-Mao era, which “metastasizes from a modest village into a town, a county, a city,

and finally a provincial-level megalopolis” (Yan, *Explosion Chronicles* vii). Wang Shouren and Liu Yang approach the novel from the perspective of “mythorealism,” a critical term invented by Yan Lianke.¹ Tracing the birth of Chinese mythorealism to the 1980s, Yan Lianke has defined the concept as “a creative process that rejects the superficial logical relations that exist in real life to explore a kind of invisible and ‘nonexistent’ truth—a truth that is obscured by truth itself.” Yan Lianke also explains that much Chinese literature has not managed to catch up with “contemporary China’s richness, complexity, strangeness, and absurdity” (Yan, *Discovering Fiction* 99, 101), and that mythorealism attempts to do just this. This is all somewhat unclear, but perhaps mythorealism can be summarized as follows: a style of literature which uses myth to see past apparent truth and to grasp the real truth.

In this article, Wang Shouren and Liu Yang clearly explain Yan Lianke’s views on the differences between mythorealism and magical realism, which is particularly useful because this would be one of the first questions to occur to readers unfamiliar with mythorealism. They note that many Western literary works can be placed in a continuum in terms of their treatment of causality. Traditional realist novels demonstrate “full causality,” where every action is explained through credible antecedent causes, while magical realist novels demonstrate “half-causality,” offering a credible narrative with some fantastical elements. Literary works with “zero-causality,” such as Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915), commit a “total violation of the law of nature or society in the real world.” Mythorealism is an attempt to transcend this continuum altogether, establishing the “inner truth” and “inner causality” of reality (Liu and Wang, “Mythology, History, and Reality” 183). It aims for the “establishment and confirmation of the deep logic of a story’s inner causality” (Yan, *Discovering Fiction* 117).

Wang Shouren and Liu Yang conclude that mythorealism’s “chief appeal for Chinese intellectuals is its power to reveal and manifest, its call for the transformation of society, and its potential to lead China onto the road of a modern nation” (Liu and Wang, “Mythology, History, and Reality” 188). This comment indicates the authors’ belief in the transformative power of literature. They would no doubt cite Milton’s words in confirmation of their view: “Books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are” (Milton 16). The printed word, in their view, can

¹ The word had been used before, but not with precisely the same meaning. For example, Ann Moseley has referred to the “mythorealistic” approach of the 1913 novel *O Pioneers!* by Willa Cather. See Ann Moseley, “Mythic Reality: Structure and Theme in Cather’s *O Pioneers!*,” *Under the Sun: Myth and Realism in Western American Literature*, edited by Barbara Howard Meldrum, Troy: Whitston Publishing Company, 1985, 93.

reveal new truths, reshape society and spur cultural development. This is a salutary reminder and one which should always be borne in mind as one of the highest purposes of literary study. This article is a culmination of Wang Shouren's hard-won expertise on realism, as also illustrated, incidentally, in his recent review of a massive, international essay collection on the same subject.¹ Finally, to reemphasize the main point of this section, the 2021 article on mythorealism is a successful continuation of Wang Shouren's long-held interest in the intersection between cultural history and literature.

The Integration of History, Literature and Society in Wang Shouren's Writings

In a similar vein to his interdisciplinary work on realism, Wang Shouren has also applied his knowledge of literature and world history to provide sage insights into contemporary issues. He understands that literary knowledge and taste can have a real-world application; their operation is not confined to the rarefied world of scholarship. In the early 2000s, he served as co-editor of three volumes of essays entitled *Critical Zone: A Forum of Chinese and Western Knowledge*, jointly published by Hong Kong University Press and Nanjing University Press. These volumes take a critical look at the globalization of humanities research. Wang Shouren contributed an article to the first volume entitled "English and the Humanities in China," co-written with Zhao Wenshu, then an associate professor at Nanjing University. Taking a historical approach, authors trace the fortunes of English as a foreign language in China, observing that English teaching was encouraged under the republican Kuomintang government (1912-1949); suppressed in favor of Russian-language teaching from the 1950s to the 1970s; and then restored to a place of importance in the 1970s.² The three volumes of *Critical Zone* contain much good common sense in their discussions of the relationship between history, literature and society. For example, the third volume features an interview with the historian Zhu Xueqin, who argues that history must be written and taught from "a historical outlook" (Zhu 182, 184). Western scholars, who for decades have been flailing around for workable historical philosophies, would do well to bear this practical point in mind.

Wang Shouren presented further insights from his study of history and literature

1 See Wang Shouren, "Book Review: *Landscapes of Realism: Rethinking Literary Realism in Comparative Perspectives Volume II: Pathways Through Realism*," *Orbis Litterarum* 2 (2024). Published ahead of print.

2 See Wang Shouren and Zhao Wenshu, "English and the Humanities in China," *Critical Zone: A Forum of Chinese and Western Knowledge* Vol. 1, edited by Q. S. Tong, Wang Shouren and Douglas Kerr, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004, 69-78.

in a 2006 article coauthored with Zhao Wenshu entitled “China’s Peaceful Rise: A Cultural Alternative.” In *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), the American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington presented a vision of China developing into an aggressor and triggering a world war between the USA, Europe, Russia and India on one side and China, Japan and Islamic countries on the other. Wang Shouren and Zhao Wenshu critique this vision, arguing that China has always been a peace-loving country; that Confucianism emphasizes the importance of harmony rather than conflict; and that the belief that a rising China will inevitably become expansionist is based on erroneously applying an unsuitable European model. They quote from *The Battle of China*, an American film from 1944, that describes the Chinese as an inherently peaceful people: “[I]n all their 4,000 years of history, they have never waged a war of conquest. They are that sort of people” (qtd. in Wang and Zhao, “China’s Peaceful Rise” 121). Anticipating the objection that Communist theory stresses the necessity of conflict, the authors point out that Confucianism continues to exert an influence in China despite having been formerly suppressed, and that it now enjoys official endorsement. They conclude that “China may provide a viable alternative to the conflict-dominated pattern, contributing positively to the diversity of the multicultural world” (Wang and Zhao, “China’s Peaceful Rise” 127).

Wang Shouren developed some of these themes further in an article entitled “Foreign Literature and the Shaping of Modern Values in Chinese Society”. In this article, he argued that foreign literature has played different roles in modern China at various stages of her history. In late Qing and Republican China, foreign literature was translated into Chinese in an attempt to “waken the slumbering Chinese, and to mobilize them to resist foreign encroachment on the Chinese soil,” with scholars of the May Fourth Movement actively promoting the social function of foreign literature and advocating “science, democracy and liberty with unprecedented passion” (Wang, “Foreign Literature and the Shaping of Modern Values” 238-239). Following the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Western literature was supplanted by Russian literature, of which over 82 million copies were printed in China between 1949 to 1958.¹ When the decade-long Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1976, China began to open up to the rest of the world, and Chinese readers began to devour Western literary works, from Agatha Christie to high modernist novels. In the twenty-first century, foreign literature has somewhat declined in importance, due to competition from television, film and other media; and also to

1 See Wang Shouren, “Foreign Literature and the Shaping of Modern Values in the Chinese Society,” *Nanda Review* 1 (2009): 238-250.

a new national pride and consciousness in China's native cultural traditions.¹ The most striking fact that emerges from this historical narrative is that the reception of foreign literature in China has long been collectivist and influenced from the top down by national politics. Today, perhaps, readers may choose their books based on personal whims and preferences.

Conclusion

Throughout his distinguished career, Wang Shouren has always strived to foster excellence in the study of foreign literature in China. Working both individually and in collaboration, he has been prolific in publishing on a wide range of themes in Anglophone literature, culture and society. The present article has examined just one aspect of his scholarly oeuvre, namely the role that historical study has played in illuminating the study of foreign literature. Wang Shouren's work has always been productively interdisciplinary, which is evident even in his earliest writings on British and American literature. More recently, his work on mythorealism has demonstrated that he remains at the forefront of literary research, helping to promote and explain cutting-edge developments in literature and scholarship. On a personal note, he showed a great deal of kindness to me while I was working at Nanjing University. It is a fitting honor that his work and career should form the subject of this special issue.

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¹ See Wang Shouren, "Foreign Literature and the Shaping of Modern Values in the Chinese Society," *Nanda Review* 1 (2009): 241-248.

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