

# Holism, Representation and Realism: Wang Shouren's Writing of the History of Contemporary Foreign Literature in China

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**Abstract:** The emergence and subsequent predominance of instrumental rationality catalyzed a paradigm shift, bringing the utilitarian aspect of literature to the forefront, thus elevating the issue of “use of literature” to prominence in China. The four-volume *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* written by Professor Wang Shouren and his colleagues is a Chinese response to this paradigm shift. It redefines the Chinese perception of literature from a perspective that transcends eurocentrism, marking a significant stride in interpreting literatures of the world. By advocating holism and value judgment, the dynamic representation theory of literature and taking realism as epistemology, this *History* affirmed the value of literature. Meanwhile, one of the most noteworthy contributions of *History* lies in its introduction, as implied by the title, of a new concept for periodization: post-World War II literature. And the layout of these four volumes corresponding with the logic and method of the “beam-column style assembly” in traditional Chinese architecture, sets up a unique model for literary history writing, one that based on relational philosophy. In this sense, *History* is a landmark in the continuation and renewal of the tradition of the writing of the history of foreign literature in China.

**Keywords:** Wang Shouren; literary history; holism; representation theory; realism

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**标题:** 整体性、再现论与现实主义：王守仁与中国当代外国文学史书写

**内容摘要:** 随着工具理性带来的社会发展范式的转变，文学的功利性问题凸显，继而令文学之用在中國语境中也如在美国一般变得问题化。王守仁教授等撰写的四卷本《战后世界进程与外国文学进程研究》是对这一问题的中国回应。丛书以超越欧洲中心主义的视角，重新审视中国之外的世界文学，通

过倡导整体性和价值判断，文学动态再现论，以及将现实主义作为认识论，肯定了文学的价值。此外，该四卷本的一个重要创见是提出了一个新的历史分期概念：“战后外国文学”，而四卷书的布局与中国古建筑中的“梁柱式装配”的逻辑和方式颇为契合，构成一套基于关系哲学的别具一格的文学史，这是对中国的外国文学史书写的继承和创新。

**关键词：**王守仁；文学史；整体论；再现论；现实主义

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Confucius said, “Poetry can stimulate, observe, gather, and complain” (Yang 183). Having garnered a consensus among Confucian intellectuals, this assertion affirms the multifaceted values of literature. Due to this consensus, the “use of literature” did not surface as an essential issue within the Chinese intellectual tradition, albeit the influence of Daoist advocacy of *wuwei*, meaning non-action and the transcendent ethos of the Wei and Jin Dynasties. Nevertheless, the emergence and subsequent predominance of instrumental rationality catalyzed a paradigm shift, bringing the utilitarian aspect of literature to the forefront, thus elevating the issue of “use of literature” to prominence in China. In multiple senses, the four-volume *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* (hereinafter referred to as “*History*”) written by Professor Wang Shouren and his colleagues responds to the shift. He thus states at the start of the “General Introduction” to the *History*:

literary creation is a reflection and representation of social life, as well as an active response to real-life politics and culture milieu. Consequently, literature assumes a pivotal role in shaping the zeitgeist of an era, in cultivating core societal values, in forging national identity, and in perpetuating national cultural heritage. (vol. 1, 1)

Wang Shouren’s affirmation of the theory of representation in literature, its intrinsic historicity, and its dynamic interplay with reality from a socio-historical standpoint forms the basis of the *History*.

*History* consists of four volumes: *A Study of Postwar Realist Literature*, *A Study of Postmodern Literature*, *A Study of Contemporary Foreign Literature from the Perspective of Globalization*, and *A Study of Trends in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Foreign Literature*. As is revealed by the titles, this is a contemporary reflection on the contemporary. If history reflects changes over time as what is generally believed, the chronicling of literary developments outside of China within the broader context

of historical and cultural shifts in *History* marks an effort to respond to the evolving global order, an effort from Chinese scholars to update the coordinate for observing and understanding the world and for gaining better self-insights.

### **Holism and Value Judgment**

History-writing is a deeply-ingrained tradition in China. Zhao Tingyang equates history to “the foundation of the Chinese spiritual world” (1), thereby elevating historicity to a stature comparable to that of religion. In the Chinese context, history writing is meant to identify and then reinforce the tradition through chronological recounting of events; it is an intricate process of reevaluation so as to discern trends in social development, and ultimately it serves as a medium for history writers to articulate their worldviews and assert their philosophical stances. Qian Mu once remarked, “In the pursuit of knowledge, one must first have an intention. Different intentions will lead to different choices of materials and different ways of using these materials” (1). This principle is particularly pertinent to the writing of this history of contemporary foreign literature. The criteria for the selection of materials and the process of compilation are imbued with the compiler’s presuppositions, revealing underlying intention, and more importantly, value judgments.

In this vein, *History* stands as a laudable endeavor. It aims to reconstruct value judgments and reemphasize the concept of holism in literary studies. This objective is particularly salient in an era where post-structuralism has profoundly fragmented traditional value systems. With *History*, Wang Shouren reaffirms the value of literature in a world where established norms and structures are constantly being questioned and reinterpreted.

The deliberate positioning of “history” ahead of “foreign literature” in the title of *History* reflects Wang Shouren’s acute concerns with the fundamental issues in literature studies. The rise of post-structuralism has rigorously scrutinized and challenged the notion of certainty as a presence. While the liberating forces released by post-structuralist thought cannot be dismissed, its propensity to engender a sense of fragmentation and a history vacuum is equally undeniable. It is in this context that *History* makes a bold assertion of its intent to “return to the historical scene” (vol. 1, 5). This approach is not merely about placing literature within a broad social and historical milieu; it is about delving into the origins, trajectories, and contexts of global literary phenomena, thereby tracing their evolutionary paths in historical contexts.

Indeed, *History* exemplifies a meticulous fusion of history and critical comment, adhering to the guiding principle of “using history to support critical comment and

using comment to illustrate history” (vol. 1, 6). It follows two lines of thought:

Firstly, it traces the evolution and context of literary trends and schools of thought, delving into their profound social, historical, and intellectual underpinnings. This approach facilitates a nuanced analysis of the characteristics that define foreign literature. Secondly, a chronological framework is used, elucidating the development of foreign literature in post-World War II era according to key stages of societal and historical progression and pivotal events. (vol. 1, 5)

Within the framework thus created, *History* provides close-up studies on different authors. By intertwining macroscopic overviews with microscopic analyses, *History* achieves a balanced synthesis of broad historical contexts and individual literary contributions, thereby offering an enriched perspective on the complex interplay between literature and its historical milieu.

This endeavor represents a concerted effort to restore a sense of totality and historical consciousness on a global scale. Wang Shouren emphasizes the intrinsic link between literature and the socio-economic foundations of its era, asserting that “literature of a certain era is formed and developed on the basis of the social life and economic foundation of that era” and that “literature is one of the ways in which humans understand the world [...] and historical processes are the basis of literary aesthetics, a decisive factor in driving literary processes” (vol. 1, 4). In highlighting this symbiotic relationship, *History* not only reaffirms the cognitive and social value of literature but also champions the idea that literature is an integral part of the historical narrative, shaping and being shaped by the ebbs and flows of societal transformations.

The symbiotic relationship between literature and history highlights the significance of periodization in history writing. There is a prevailing tendency in the academia to categorize the literary outputs that emerged in Western Europe and the United States after World War II under the label of “postmodernism.” This categorization serves to demarcate them from the modernist literature prevalent in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Intrinsically, the prefix “post” in postmodernism signifies a sequential timeline; it denotes the termination of the modern era. If the world after World War II witnessed the birth of postmodern, how should we define literary movements or schools of thought comes after postmodernism? Debates regarding the post-postmodern era surfaced at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, these discussions have largely been inconclusive, failing to reach a consensus or coin an umbrella term that aptly generalizes the literary period succeeding

postmodernism. This absence of a definitive term has resulted in a conceptual void in literary periodization.

One of the most noteworthy contributions of *History* lies in its introduction, as implied by the title, of a new concept for periodization: post-World War II literature. Published in 2019, *History* regards the time span from the conclusion of World War II up to 2019 as a distinctive epoch in human history. This is “an era of unprecedentedly rapid development in human history” (vol. 1, 3), characterized on one hand by the entrance to a post-industrial society marked by advancements in intelligent technology and the ascendancy of information and knowledge as core structural elements; it, on the other hand, is distinctly shaped by the pervasive influence of globalization.<sup>1</sup> Literature produced in this era exhibits distinct artistic characteristics and a zeitgeist that diverges markedly from earlier historical periods.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to periodization, the layout of the *History* experimented with a new model of holistic history writing. Ge Zhaoguang points out that the Chinese tradition of historiography is significantly shaped by “tradition of history and biography writing and the study of catalog” (8). When drafting literary histories, there is a tendency to adhere to a chronological framework, threading the lives, literary works, or accomplishments of eminent personalities. Chinese-authored histories of foreign literature often stay true to this paradigm, striving to depict a seamless and seemingly predestined narrative of progress. Nonetheless, the layout of *History* deviates from such conventional templates, aspiring instead to capture a richly layered and multidimensional view of literary history which is not bound by linear progression. While temporal components are acknowledged, they are not the sole organizing principle; biographical listings of authors are eschewed in favor of situating literary movements and genres within broader socio-historic contexts.

Milan Kundera, in his seminal work *The Art of the Novel*, laconically generalizes the essence of character creation as an intricate tracing of several key words.<sup>3</sup> This strategic approach finds a parallel in the layout of the four-volume *History*: the underlying structure is meticulously crafted to highlight four pivotal concepts that define foreign literature in the post-World War II era: realism, postmodernism, a global perspective, and evolving trends. These concepts serve as foundational pillars, illuminating the “internal order” of the literary processes that have shaped foreign

1 See Wang Shouren, et al., *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* Vol. 1, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019, 4.

2 See Wang Shouren, et al., *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* Vol. 1, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019, 5.

3 See Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, translated by Dong Qiang, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Press, 2004, 38.

literature during this significant period. Wang Shouren's articulation of the objective of *History* corresponds to this approach: it is "not about pursuing an exhaustive national literary history but a study that focuses on certain key aspects. Through an in-depth research on important schools of thought, trends, and phenomena that concern the whole, *History* is committed to unravel complex and diverse interactions between the global historical process and the literary process Post-World War II" (vol. 1, 2).

The first volume *A Study of Postwar Realist Literature* is comprised of ten chapters. Anchored in the theoretical framework of realism, this volume situates literatures from various countries and areas within their respective traditions and historical contexts. Thus realism is investigated in the plural form. Significantly, the authors endeavor to adopt the impartial stance of a historian. For instance, in the discussion of socialist realism literature in the former Soviet Union, they argue that its evolution is intrinsically linked to the political and societal vicissitudes from the inception to the dissolution of the Soviet state. The literature of this era necessitated the "depiction of life through a historical and concretely realistic aesthetic lens, whilst concurrently underscoring the infusion of socialist ideology within the creative expression" (vol. 1, 263). Consequently, Soviet socialist realism literature manifested distinctive traits over various phases. The second volume *A Study of Postmodern Literature*, including seventeen chapters, endeavors to answer the question "what was postmodernism." The initial seven chapters delve into the theoretical foundation of postmodernist literature, while the ensuing discourse delineate the distinctive features of postmodernist literature across different nations and areas outside of China. Of particular note is the second chapter, which addresses the complexities inherent in defining postmodernism, specifically engaging with the concept's inherent ambiguity. This portrays the variegated landscape of uncertainty that aligns with the complexities of value judgment amid the ascendancy of post-structuralism, a movement that questions traditional tenets. This volume does not shy away from these entanglements of definition. Instead, it transcends the prevailing perplexity, thus contributing an examination and critique from an elevated vantage point.

The third volume, entitled *A Study of Contemporary Foreign Literature from the Perspective of Globalization* sets itself apart from previous historical inquiries by tacitly embedding globalization as its context. It posits the notion that "globalization is transforming the disciplinary demarcations, epistemic structures, and theoretical methodologies pertinent to literary studies" (vol. 3, 23), as well as asserting that "globalization, being a historical agent, is reshaping the existential and conceptual spheres of individuals" (vol. 4, 20). Situated within the framework of globalization,

this volume attempts to re-evaluate authors and their literary outputs with concepts such as ecology, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and post-colonialism as analytical lenses, thus offering a multifaceted and enriched view of contemporary literary discourse.

Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce's comment on all true history as contemporary history is much favored and frequently referenced by Chinese scholars. Within the ambit of literary history study, this adage signifies a pronounced consciousness of the present era and a concentration on current affairs in the composition and examination of literary history. *History* however extends its concern beyond the immediacy of the present, reminding readers that the emphasis on contemporaneity stems from a concern for the future. The future dimension is what concerns the fourth volume, *A Study of the Trends in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Foreign Literature*. Authors of this volume propose that the innovation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century lies in the adoption of novel modes of expression, the rejuvenation of conventional methods such as realism.<sup>1</sup> They perceive the emergence of a tendency to "intentionally obscure demarcation lines between literature and other branches of knowledge [...] This approach integrates human intellectual life as an entirety within the narrative framework, thereby expanding the narrative possibilities in literature" (vol. 4, 20).

Ostensibly, realism, postmodernism, global perspective, and literary trends are four heterogeneous strands of inquiry. While they may intersect with each other, they each possess the capacity to stand on its own. This quartet layout indicates that all four strands are concurrently addressed. Notably, different from a polyphonic discourse that typically accentuates the parity of each constituent voice, ensuring that no single voice assumes a position of dominance, the accomplishment of *History* is predicated upon the artistry of historical spatial analysis with each installment in this four-volume collection bears distinct emphases, investigative directions, and functional purposes. Therefore, characterizing it with parity would be somewhat reductive.

Instead, the layout of the four volumes bears striking resemblance to the logic and method of "beam-column style assembly" found in ancient Chinese architecture. The notion of "assembly style," a fundamental concept borrowed from ancient Chinese construction practices, conveys the principle whereby individual components are independently fabricated yet when joined together, fits with precise interlocking, forming an integrated whole. While the wholeness is reflected in the thematic continuity of the four volumes, in their investigation and delineation of

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<sup>1</sup> See Wang Shouren, et al., *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* Vol. 4, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019, 19.

how literature mirrors and re-acts to the historical process of reality, each volume is led by an independent thematic thread, with the dynamic theory of representation serving as the joint in the assembly style that connects essential segments, thereby facilitating the coherence for this scholarly endeavor.

The assembly-style layout turns *History* into a work predicated on relationality, through which the complexity of the global historical process is examined. In an era marked by the subversive and deconstructive tendencies of postmodernism, *History* stands as a remarkable attempt at restoring totality and order amidst fragmentation.

Notably, the emphasis on a holistic worldview does not seek to obfuscate difference; instead, it aims for a holism that honors and encompasses diversity. A pivotal underpinning of this endeavor is the belief in the “togetherness” in living together, the tolerance towards difference and diversity. In a section entitled “Don’t Talk to Strangers” in *Liquid Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman discusses how modern fluidity disrupts traditional societal constructs and collective identities, leading to scenarios where individuals may avoid “togetherness” even in face-to-face encounters.<sup>1</sup> The foundation for such togetherness is a communal framework of conviviality, one that encourages communication, interaction, and the establishment of bond-like connections.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a surge of interest in the composition of literary histories in the West. However, by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of drafting literary history was under close scrutiny due to the alert to master narratives implied therein. Contrary to these endeavors, Wang Shouren’s focus on historical and cultural milieus, alongside the concept of the “historical scene,” serves as a counteractive measure to the relative erosion of historical consciousness that has pervaded Western society in the postmodern era. He contends that to truly comprehend the principal trajectory and traits of post-World War II foreign literature, it is imperative to revisit the “historical scene” of literature’s genesis. Such a retracing is intended to “elucidate and articulate the intertwined relationship between the origination, distribution, transformation, and societal existence of literature” (vol. 1, 5). This pivot towards the restoration of value-based critique and the recognition of literature as a representation of the zeitgeist—acknowledging the fluid interplay between literary works and the contemporary settings out of which they arise—offer a corrective to the prevalent challenges within Western historical narration.

### **A Dynamic Theory of Representation**

Against the backdrop of diverse post-structuralist theories, conventional theory of

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1 See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity, 2000, 104-109.



literature-as-representation, considered obsolescent, has been relegated to the margins of literary scholarship. Underscoring representation as literature's intrinsic attribute, however, *History* advocates a dynamic theory of representation by highlighting literature's intervention in reality. In so doing, it transcends the dichotomy of "mirror" and "lamp" as metaphorical frameworks for the contemplation of the relationship between literature and history. Thus, literature may and can act as an "event," actively contributing to history. To quote Wang Shouren, literature encompasses "an active participant in historical process, consciously intervening in life, and fostering societal transformation and progress" (vol.1, 5).

This dynamic representation is present in post-World War II literary creation at a TransAreal scale. Taking the United States as an example, its literature embodies a dualistic approach of "realistic referencing and intervention" (vol. 1, 115). Differentiating early US American realism from its European predecessors, *History* claims that US American realism in the post-World War II era had undergone an introspective turn. This shift fulfills literature's function of intervening into reality in addition to representation and critique. Anti-war literature for instance was at the vanguard of this development. It became an exemplary manifestation of realist literature actively engaging with social and political transformations. Authors represented by Irwin Shaw, Norman Mailer, James Jones, and Tim O'Brien illustrated the ruthlessness of modern warfare. Their potent voices of dissent intermingled with broader societal protest movements. Realist writers during such period veered to "highlight engagement with reality as opposed to mere replication and representation of reality" (vol. 1, 117).

East Asian literature, particularly post-liberation North Korean realism, provides another lucid illustration of the intervention of literature with reality owing to its accentuation of the social function of literature. As is pointed out in the *History*, North Korea has consistently grappled with austere social realities throughout the modern era. Since the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has sequentially endured Western military repression, Japanese colonization, and the Korean War. This series of historical events catalyzed realism's absolute ascendancy in contemporary North Korean literature, leading some North Korean critics to contend that modernism constitutes an "expansion and deepening of realism" (vol. 1, 525). Literary creation in North Korea after the liberation, under the sway of national ideology and the political climate, gravitated towards "realism as the sole endorsed method of literary creation in North Korea" (vol. 1, 523). The literary chronology—from "noble realism" said to "contribute to the construction of a new society" to "socialist realism," and then to "subjective realism" propagated since the 1960s, as well as the introduction

of the theory “literary works as seeds,” the value of literature as a tangible and active mechanism intervening in reality and acting on reality is emphasized and amplified.

In Asia, the evolution of realist literature in the Arab sphere is also intimately interwoven with reality. *History* argues that significantly influenced by European traditions, Arab realist literature however is primarily an outcome of the modern Arab cultural and literary renaissance. Realist literature played an active role in the Arab national liberation movement. The inception, development, and maturation of Arab realist literature align with the decolonization process of Arab nations. Hence, literary themes in the Arab world have chiefly centered on three domains:

first, conflicts and confrontations, such as the Palestinian plight, revolution and independence, the Lebanese civil war, among others; second, the relationship between the Arab world and Western political shifts; third, societal transformations of Arab nations post-independence, such as the impact of oil, urban-rural relations, women’s status, individual liberties, among others. (vol. 1, 551)

In this context, Arab realism novels, exemplified by Naguib Mahfouz’s “Cairo Trilogy,” have emerged as “tools for establishing national identity and fostering revolutionary alliances” (vol. 1, 550).

In Africa, the intervention of literature into reality assumes a palpably direct form, as African writers, particularly those at the height of their creative prowess during the decades following World War II, frequently partook in the construction of their nations’ respective cultural institutions through holding administrative positions in either governmental or non-governmental organizations. This is a “distinctly African phenomenon” (vol. 1, 433). African literature in post-World War II era exhibits a close bond with the surge of national independence movements in the 1950s and 1960s. *History* points out that despite the multitudinous ethnicities and languages in Africa, within the historical context of the transformation of African identity consciousness, anti-colonialism, anti-racial segregation, and the reconfiguration of cultural identity emerged as the three most significant thematic precincts of post-war literary creation.<sup>1</sup> As an illustrative example, consider Leopold Sedar Senghor, the Senegalese poet, whose anthology of poems, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, published in 1948, signified the zenith of the “Negritude” movement. Subsequently, in 1960, following Senegal’s

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<sup>1</sup> See Wang Shouren, et al., *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* Vol. 1, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019, 424-425.

successful bid for independence and transition into a republic, he was elected as the inaugural president. His leadership was characterized by active engagement in nation-building and persistent literary output, thereby leaving an “indelible” impression on subsequent generations of African authors.<sup>1</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor’s experience was not an isolated case; the Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi also held a public office, serving as the Director of the Health Education Department in the Ministry of Public Health.

The seismic geopolitical shifts instigated by the two World Wars of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in a major transfer in global power forthwith; the presumptive authoritative control transferred from Europe led by front-runners such as the United Kingdom and France, to the United States in North America. Along with this shift of power, the self-positioning of the vast pre-colonial world underwent fundamental changes in its interaction with European traditions. These changes are all reflected in literary creation.

Take English-speaking countries such as Australia and Canada as examples. Their realist literatures are “fragmented and hybrid,” and “lack diachronic integrated systematic relationships” (vol. 1, 566). The origin of Australian realism can be traced back to “potent nationalist sentiments” (vol. 1, 567). As the historical process changed, it metamorphosed from left-wing realism around the 1950s to urban realism in the 70s and 80s, and then to diverse realisms emerged in the 80s and 90s in the post-war period.<sup>2</sup> Despite the diverse forms, Australian realism characteristically sought to give voice to those on the periphery, sought to survive in the struggle against the mainstream, while concurrently offering insightful elucidations of Australia’s sociopolitical life that reverberated with the voices of its populace in the new era.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Australia, Canada’s propensity towards realism harks back to the nation’s early federal years, yet its espousal as a dominant literary genre did not gain momentum until the 20<sup>th</sup> century where it was often classified under the heading of “modern.” The post-World War II realism that emerged in Canadian literature is believed to have unravelled “the spiritual logic of its era” and subsequently transmuted into varied subgenres inclusive of prairie realism, urban

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1 See Wang Shouren, et al., *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* Vol. 1, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019, 427-429.

2 See Wang Shouren, et al., *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* Vol. 1, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019, 569.

3 See Wang Shouren, et al., *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* Vol. 1, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019, 569.

realism, and social realism.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, the emergence and metamorphosis of postmodern literature in the two Commonwealth nations of Australia and Canada correspond to the changes in their respective self-identifications in the post-World War II era. While such literary movements are deeply informed by Western European and American influences, it is the unique blend of social, historical, literary, and cultural traditions of each former British colony that fundamentally determines the trajectory of postmodern literature after the war.<sup>2</sup> In Australia, this era witnessed the advent of New Writing, championed by notable figures such as Frank Moorhouse and Michael Wilding. Conversely, Canadian literature departed from the typical paradigm with a developmental trajectory that bypassed the stage of full-fledged modernism rendering the “post” in its postmodernism less of a continuity indicator and more of a critical divergence.<sup>3</sup> Eschewing similarities with European and American postmodernism, Canadian postmodern literature is distinguished by an indelible regional characteristic.<sup>4</sup> The relatively constrained geographic habitation within the country, separated by topographical features such as mountains and rivers, has indicated a customary compartmentalization in terms of national identity, politics and culture, devoid of the conception of a center. This induces a potent regionalism in Canadian literary expressions, characterized by “the emphasis on difference, the description of fragmented experiences [...] and the disruption of traditional power structures and centralized narrative modalities” (vol. 2, 463-464).

These aforementioned examples demonstrate from a TransAreal perspective how post-World War II literature has played a pivotal role in reflecting and changing reality, and intervening in social and political transformations. Accordingly, as Wang Shouren argues, literary works become literary events that exert profound influence over historical trajectories. The conceptual framework of “world” embodied in these TransAreal works as well as the global perspective that informs the *History* correspond with the burgeoning trend in contemporary world literature studies.

This global and TransAreal perspective enables the *History* to transcend the confinement of national literature, regional literature, and language-specific

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1 See Wang Shouren, et al., *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* Vol. 1, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019, 609.

2 See Wang Shouren, et al., *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* Vol. 2, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019, 426.

3 See Wang Shouren, et al., *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* Vol. 2, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019, 452.

4 See Wang Shouren, et al., *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* Vol. 2, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019, 455.

literature. The broad scholarly vision it thus gained helps to deliver insightful and inspirational observations. For instance, in the discussion of the origins of modernism and postmodernism, *History* adopts the view that these literary currents emerged initially in Latin America. It acknowledges modernism's advent in 1890, a precedent by three decades relative to the Anglophone world, and postmodernism's emergence within the Hispanic critical circle during the 1930s, also predating its recognition in British and US American academic circles by some thirty years. Furthermore, in response to the diversity in the post-World War II world, Wang Shouren advocates for a pluralistic appreciation and acknowledgment of myriad -isms. This conceptual pluralization is presented not only as a value presupposition but also as a judgment. The localization of the -isms epitomizes this commitment to a pluralistic ethos.

Literature represents reality, encapsulating the zeitgeist as well as historical context of a specific epoch. Nevertheless, literature does not merely adopt a passive or static role in representation; rather, it can actively interpose itself within this reality, resonating with the historical and cultural context from which it emerges. In this development and enrichment of traditional literary theory of representation, Wang Shouren recognizes and affirms the value of literature.

### **Literature as Epistemology**

Informed by an expansive historical viewpoint and a dynamic theory of literary representation, Wang Shouren arrives at a significant judgment: in an era marked by profound structural changes and diverse evolving forms, realism stands out as a most effective, and possibly the most dependable, cognitive approach. He views it as the “optimal entry point for analyzing the post-World War II foreign literary process” (vol. 1, 6). This perspective leads to an essential inquiry: What precisely constitutes realism? Wang Shouren asserts that “realist literature is not bound by predetermined formal standards, and realism in creative endeavors does not exclude innovation in style or methodology” (vol. 1, 55). This implies that the task of identifying and defining realism, if solely based on its forms of expression and creative techniques, is inherently constrained. Instead, a deeper engagement with the core and trajectory of realism is necessary.

Approaching realism as if it were a continuously flowing river, *History* attempts to understand realism within the context of the novel tradition that originated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe. It starts with a discussion on the 18<sup>th</sup> century realism marked by authenticity (objectivity), representativeness, and historicity, realism that “posed a challenge to the artistic norms of Romanticism

and stood in opposition to all that was deemed unrealistic” (vol. 1, 30), and then moves on to various realisms that emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, among which are the so-called psychological realism, another term for stream-of-consciousness novels, and the socialist realism defined at the First Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934. It also analyzes the debates over the “death of realism” in the 1960s as well as the paradoxical relationship between the constructiveness and objectivity in literature. In an attempt to decode the shifts in the perception of reality and realism, *History* uncovers the roots of these changes: the crisis of representation.

*History* argues that this crisis stems from the changes in the perception of language’s inherent nature. The concept of arbitrariness in the relationship between the signifier and the signified disrupted the once-assumed direct link between language and reality. Theorists as represented by Roland Barthes and J. Hillis Miller, who regarded language as an enclosed system of signs, challenged its capability to accurately represent reality, effectively cutting off the connection between language and the actual world. They scrutinized, and at times outright rejected, the ability of texts made up of language symbols to reference reality in a meaningful way.

With the help of Marxist theories, *History* reintroduces literary studies back to the external world by dissolving the barrier between external reality and the textual real. Wang Shouren posits that “literature, as a manifestation of aesthetic ideology, is shaped by social existence, akin to other ideologies” and he emphasizes that “the capacity of language to signify and to reference reality is a fundamental necessity for everyday communication” (vol. 1, 19). Underpinning this argument is the conviction that while literature may be a construct of fiction, it is not solely self-referential. More importantly it references reality. Thus, “realism” must engage with “the interaction between language and the actual world” (vol. 1, 7). Typical examples of this interaction are the aforementioned cases in which realist literature becomes literary events that intervene with reality. Viewed in this line, the so-called “crisis of representation” is but a metaphysical play and creating a divide between language and reality is inherently restrictive.

Undoubtedly, focusing on the constructive power of language and the critical examination on language inevitably alters and enriches traditional understandings of realism. In this vein, while acknowledging the consensus among researchers regarding the core attributes of realism, specifically the conception of realism as the “impulse to imitate and focus on external reality,” *History* advocates for “the integration of textuality and constructiveness into realism, without compromising its essential principles” (vol. 1, 48). To accomplish this, *History* suggests that it is “imperative to steer clear of the propensity for the widely abuse of fictionalization

that characterizes postmodernism” (vol. 1, 48-49). This critique of widely abuse of fictionalization addresses the key issue in the ongoing discussions and debates about the nature and scope of realism.

The crisis of representation is but one of the numerous challenges that post-World War II realism has faced. The advent of the internet as a dominant medium and the progression of artificial intelligence technology have ushered in a significant transformation in the mediums through which we experience life. This shift is fundamentally altering the nature of human experience. The once-clear demarcation between virtual and physical reality is becoming increasingly blurred. In this new context, the very definitions of “reality” and “truth” are being called into question, opening up avenues for further inquiry and exploration.

Discussions of truth is at the heart of Western philosophical thought. Traditional discussions often use the rhetoric of tautology to equate reality with truth. This is exemplified in Plato’s argument for expelling poets from his republic since their descriptions of the world are thrice removed from truth. However, the notion of “reality” itself is fraught with paradoxes. The quest for a “reality” that aligns perfectly and objectively with the “truth” of the world is, in essence, a pursuit of an illusion. Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* is an example. While applauded as an autobiography, the novel faced contemporary charges of being fictional. Often hailed as the inaugural work of realist fiction in British literary history, it paradoxically creates a utopia. In the preface to *Serious Reflections during Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, the final part of the Robinson Crusoe trilogy, Defoe delves into the intricacies of truth. He defends his narrative by invoking two kinds of truths. He contends that the story of Robinson aligns with the historical aspect of truth while simultaneously embodying an allegorical truth, the latter suggesting a mythological dimension to the truth portrayed in the novel.

Discussions on truth also capture the attention of Chinese thinkers. Zhao Tingyang for instance introduces a bifurcation of truth: one being “truth in time,” and the other as “historical truth.” For him, these two forms of truth coexist with “one type of truth constructing knowledge, whereas the other shaping spirit” (35). Zhao also raises the notion of “scientifically true” (33), a concept rooted in the repeatable nature in scientific findings. This differentiation, underscoring the multi-dimensional nature of truth, raises the pivotal question about the the dimensions of truth. That is what turns the exploration and discussion of truth into an ongoing and multifaceted endeavor.

György Lukács and Bertolt Brecht once offered distinct interpretations of “truth” in literature. In “Cognitive Dimensions of Realism” (14), a collaborative work

by Wang Shouren and Liu Yang, the dynamic and paradoxical essence of Lukács's realism is thoroughly examined. Contrasting to this view, Brecht's understanding of realism emphasizes its social function. While they stood as intellectual opponents, both Lukács and Brecht both distinguished realism from mere modes of representation, thus contributing varied but profound insights into the nature of literary truth.

Wang Shouren, anchoring his approach in a dynamic socio-historical critical theory, moves beyond metaphysical discussions to suggest that the truth pursued in realism is "an essential reality." This redefined reality draws upon historical facts while striving to achieve a more elevated "artistic reality" (vol. 1, 22). The introduction of the concept of "artistic reality" validates the quest for truth in literature and art. Consequently, realist literature, acting as a bridge between historical and artistic reality, is a cognitive tool. Through the use of language (literature), it seeks to convey an understanding of truth (reality), thus adopting the role of an epistemological instrument.

Realist literature as a genre culminates in the discussion of novels whereas realism as an epistemology clearly encompasses a much broader scope. As is demonstrated in *History*, the discussion covers not only drama, such as I. M. Dvoreckij's play *An Outsider*<sup>1</sup> and Mikhail Shatrov's two plays on Vladimir Lenin<sup>2</sup>, but also poetry, including Yevgeny Yevtushenko's lyric poem "Mom and Neutron Bomb" (vol. 1, 310). With realism as the epistemology, *History* introduces realism in the plural form, bringing to light writers and traditions that are less known in China. For instance, the 2<sup>nd</sup> section of Chapter 9 in Volume 1 is devoted to the discussion of North Korean realism.

Indeed, literature is a translation of life. The power of literature lies in its capacity to encapsulate the spirit of the times and to depict human existence. In this sense, writers, irrespective of their chosen medium, are explorers of existence. The morality of literature lies in its imaginative exploration of life's myriad possibilities. Discussions on the essence of literature, whether rooted in traditional mimesis or traditional representation theory, often draw attention to the distance between literature and life. But this distance disappears in Wang Shouren's dynamic representation theory, with art and life being in a mutually "constructive" relationship, each profoundly influencing and shaping the other.

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1 See Wang Shouren, et al., *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* Vol. 1, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019, 306.

2 See Wang Shouren, et al., *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* Vol. 1, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019, 316.



The disappearance of distance enables a shift in focus from the dichotomy of truth and fiction to the interplay between reality and imagination. Focusing solely on the reality-fiction binary can be misleading, as reality, from a human perspective, is inherently intertwined with imagination. Therefore, realist literature can be viewed as the construction of reality in the domain of imagination. In this context, discussions about reality veer away from ontological debates towards questions of epistemology, questions of boundary. Truths in this sense diverging from the Platonic ideal of transcendence, represent in the plural form identifications, diverse, recognized truths that “aligns with people’s perceptions and expectations of the world” (Wang and Tang 4). As Wang Shouren suggests, realism constructs a “reference” to the real world within the realm of imagination.<sup>1</sup> This assertion confirms the idea that imagination is the bridge between reality and literature, and that literary imagination should ultimately point to reality.

Each era, nation, and area develops its own form of realism, congruent with its social and historical contexts. Be it impersonal reality, psychological reality, pathological reality, magical realism, structural realism, or Mo Yan’s hallucinatory realism, each form belongs to the realism of its specific time and place. These literary movements “reflect the profound influence of historical processes on literary developments” (vol. 4, 19), unveiling various dimensions of human existence. In an age where the influence of religion and philosophy is diminishing, literature emerges as a conduit to truth.

*Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* redefines the Chinese perception of world literature from a perspective that transcends Eurocentrism, marking a significant stride in interpreting literatures of the world through a Chinese lens. Although the title merely mentions foreign literature, Wang Shouren’s global viewpoint is eloquently articulated in the “General Introduction”: “The study of foreign literature is not merely about comprehending other cultures; it also facilitates the enhancement, development, and promotion of our own culture” (vol. 1, 1). This perception resonates with the principles for research proposed by Qian Mu: “Analyzing similarities and differences, evaluating gains and losses, and understanding both ourselves and others are integral to our collective pursuit of progress” (130).

The title of *History* reveals its presupposition in research: delving into the dynamic interaction between literary development and historical process with a socio-historical approach, so as to discover the inherent logic. The adoption of this

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<sup>1</sup> See Wang Shouren, et al., *Post-WWII History and the Development of Foreign Literature* Vol. 1, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019, 20.

approach indicates the authors' aspiration not only to capture a sense of reality but also to imbue a profound sense of history. As a result, *History* adeptly melds meticulous academic rigor with a keen understanding of the zeitgeist and a vivid historical imagination. It stands as a testament to its comprehensive embrace of historical depth, active engagement with reality, and foresight into the future. Furthermore, the implied concern and care for the state of the world and the human condition, as conveyed between the lines, especially the efforts to construct a holistic view and establish a sense of order, is of immense value.

School of Foreign Studies at Nanjing University, where Wang Shouren works, has developed a tradition of compiling foreign literary history. Esteemed works such as *Outline of British and American Literature* and *British and American Historical Outline* by Fan Cunzhong and the four-volume *History of British Literature* by Chen Jia are read and consulted as text books by generations of Chinese scholars. Wang Shouren himself also has contributed significantly to this field, co-editing the four-volume *Literary History of the United States* and serving as the deputy editor of the five-volume *A History of Twentieth-Century Foreign Literature*. Compared with these, *History* stands out from traditional methods of compiling and presenting foreign literary history, which often emphasize listing and showcasing. It surpasses its predecessors by offering broad coverage and a multidimensional perspective. More importantly, it sets up a new model, the assembly style model for literary history writing. The comprehensive and dynamic interpretation *History* offers showcases the distinctive approach of Chinese scholars to foreign literature studies.

Conventionally, historical writing is an endeavor where the present engages with the past, marked by a distinct temporal distance between the historian and the historical subject. Yet, the composition of contemporary history transcends this chronological divide, facilitating a more immediate interaction with its subject. *History* epitomizes this transcendence, not merely by its contemporaneity but by its forward-looking perspective. It is poised to serve as a critical sample for historiography, offering substantial and tangible evidence from this specific epoch. Such a resource is invaluable for future scholars seeking to reinterpret and critically evaluate this segment of history with fresh insights.

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