

Wang Shouren and the Realist Turn in Contemporary World Literature: Foundational Theory, Postmodern Realism and Glocality

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Abstract: Amid mounting discourse on contemporary literary realism in international academia, Wang Shouren, a leading Chinese scholar of foreign literature stands out as a championing figure in marshalling the recent academic turn to realism in China. In the past few decades, he has made unremitting endeavor towards constructing a systematic body of knowledge regarding literary realism. Weaving his way through voluminous scholarship on realism and histories of the 20th century and contemporary literature, he proposes a set of keywords (truth, mimesis, reality, fiction) and pathways (cognitive, aesthetic, affective, intermedial) to set up the theoretic foundation of realism for more meaningful academic exploration. At the same time, being a historian of postwar foreign literature, he teases out a steady strain of realism running through a variety of postmodern literary texts—first mainly sourced from postwar Anglo-American literature and later from a much wider scope of world literature including contemporary Chinese authors. As a result, Wang Shouren's outlook on realism extends both along the global and local axes towards a glocalized perception of literary realism as a pluralistic form open to proliferation and permutation in the remapping of the world literary system. In particular, his Chinese identity equips him with a distinct Chinese scope of view which consists in Chinese perspective, Chinese stance, Chinese insights and Chinese resources, enabling him to be an outstanding spokesperson for realism's contemporary manifestations in world literature.

Keywords: Wang Shouren; the Realist Turn; foundational theory of literary realism; postmodern realism; glocality

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标题: 王守仁与当代世界文学的现实主义转向：文学原理、后现代现实主义与全球地方性

内容摘要: 近年来，当代现实主义文学越来越受到国际学术界的关注，多年

致力于建构现实主义知识体系的王守仁则是在这波浪潮中推动中国的外国文学研究界走向现实主义转向的引领者。为从学理上重新评估现实主义在当代文学发展中呈现出的特质与要义，他基于大量现实主义研究以及 20 世纪与当代文学史，提炼出现实主义作为基本文学原理的四个关键词（现实、摹仿、真实、虚构）与四个维度（认知、审美、情动、跨媒介）。与此同时，王守仁对现实主义的理論层面研究根植于他对战后后现代文学的全面把握与深入解读——从战后英美文学作品逐步拓展到包括当代中国文学在内的更加广阔的世界文学范畴。他的学术视野因而在全球性与地方性两条轴线上不断延伸，汇聚呈现出的“全球地方性”推动现实主义成为重绘世界文学体系过程中一个不断增殖、嬗变的复数概念。尤为重要的是，王守仁的中国学者身份赋予他包含着中国视角、中国立场、中国智慧、中国资源的中国视域，这一独特视域的赋能使他成为现实主义在当代世界文学中多元表达的杰出代言人。

关键词：王守仁；现实主义转向；现实主义文学原理；后现代现实主义；全球地方性

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Amid the burgeoning western discourse on contemporary realism, Wang Shouren, a leading Chinese scholar of English literature and literary realism stands out as a championing figure in marshalling the recent academic turn to realism in China. In a recent interview “The Realist Turn and Other Related Issues” (2020), he envisions the new prospects of contemporary realism in world literature and boldly suggests that “the twenty-first century may be called an era of realism” (12). His anticipation for the emerging realist turn delivers an unambiguous message about the enduring significance of literary realism which has been time again acknowledged by such renowned critics as M. H. Abrams for being “a recurrent mode, in various eras and literary forms, of representing human life and experience in literature” (260) or by Malcolm Bradbury who believes realism to be a term “that is constantly rearguing itself into existence” (“Neorealist Fiction” 1134).

But if literature’s unique project “is nothing other than the fulfillment of its unique promise to represent reality realistically” which perpetually defers a definitive closure as “reality is construed as consisting of a human nature that is historically inflected” (White 88), then literary realism will have to embrace an open, experimental, and even pluralistic position in order to “smuggle more of what the artist think is reality into the work of art” (Shields 1). The position that David Shields prescribed is exactly the one that Wang Shouren has maintained over the years in his steadfast endeavor to unravelling realism’s entanglements with literary history. Keenly aware of realism’s

pluralistic and multifarious expressions especially in contemporary literature, he increasingly finds it of paramount importance to frame the rationale for his research, i.e. a foundational theory for the study of literary realism. In recent years, based upon careful scrutiny of past and current scholarship on literary realism and his on-going studies of contemporary literature, he proposes a set of keywords and pathways to reconceptualize realism for more meaningful academic exploration. At the same time, being a historian of postwar foreign literature, he teases out a steady strain of realism running through a variety of postmodern literary texts—first mainly sourced from postwar Anglo-American literature and later from a much wider scope of world literature including contemporary Chinese authors. As a result, his outlook on realism extends both along the global and local axes towards a globalized perception of literary realism as a pluralistic form open to proliferation and permutation in the remapping of the world literary system. Meanwhile his quintessential identity of a Chinese scholar whose distinctly Chinese stance somehow adds to the ineluctable process of worlding realism beyond the compass of Paris and London axis in Lauren Goodlad's description.¹

Remapping the Foundational Theory: Key Concepts and Pathways

Based on comprehensive comparison and integration of Chinese and western theories of literary realism, Wang has elicited four key concepts undergirding the conceptualization of literary realism, i.e. reality, mimesis, truth and fiction. With the four key terms as theoretic cornerstones, he suggests four major pathways in his foundational approach to realism, i.e. the cognitive, aesthetic, affective and intermedial, hence breaking new ground in contemporary scholarship of realism.

When commenting on the pressing issues and emergent tendencies in world literature as well as the study of foreign literature in China's academia since the new millennium in 2021, Chen Zhongyi, research fellow at Institute of Foreign Literature of Chinese Academy of Social Science and member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, cited Wang Shouren's research into literary realism as a paragon for a socio-historical outlook on literature which "inherits the traditional socio-historical criticism and opens up to multi-disciplinary studies and various academic schools of thinking," thus "demonstrating a clear orientation towards interdisciplinarity" (Chen 150). What features prominently in his socio-historical literary criticism is his decades' endeavor towards constructing a systematic body of knowledge regarding literary realism. Insisting on the connections between the

¹ See Lauren M. E. Goodlad, "Introduction: Worlding Realisms Now," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 2 (2016): 183-201.

word and the world which constitute the very foundation for people's everyday communication despite the heavy blows dealt from structuralism since the linguistic turn in the 1960s, he takes special recourse to Marxist historical materialism which essentially sees literature as an ideology of aesthetics determined likewise by the social existence. Although realism is an illusion wrought by fiction, it simultaneously alludes to reality which "need only be 'interpreted' to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world" (Althusser 162). Therefore, making a departure from structuralist critique of realism, Wang Shouren believes that realism is committed to the real through representation of life and signification of cultural symptoms of an era. At the same time, his socio-historical outlook upholds literature's concrete rootedness in life whose innate subtlety and growing complexity pose challenges to every generation of writers who would have to come up with different methods and tactics to distill the very "liveness" (Wood 247) out of the life they variously lead. Such inextricable correlations between life and literature hence provide the working logic for literary realism as well as for his outlook on literature and the world.

Wang Shouren's interest in realism dates back to his early exposure to a wide range of realist literature written by Charles Dickens, Honoré de Balzac, Leo Tolstoy—some of the canonical 19th century realists, as well as those by Chinese realist writers as a young man. But to his regret, he finds a sharp incongruity between the popularity that realist literature has enjoyed with the public readership and the scant attention it has received from the academia in general. Such a gap is indubitably circumscribed by the twentieth-century western aesthetics which is fundamentally dominated by modernism and postmodernism, and perhaps more importantly, ideologically fostered by the western ideology during the cold war era which pitted modernism and postmodernism against the USSR's socialist realism. The same oddity can also be found between China's warm reception of western realist literature ever since the beginning of the twentieth century and the cold shoulder that the academic circles have given to it especially since the late 1980s when the intellectual wave of postmodernism was ushered in by Fredric Jameson after his lecture series at Beijing University and Shenzhen University in 1985.¹ In contrast to the mounting attention to postmodernism among Chinese writers and academics, literary realism has often been sidelined, or "treated as a foil or target for criticism" (Liu and Wang, "The Realist Turn" 8). The evident lack of interest in literary realism among Chinese literary scholars has somehow prompted Wang

1 See Zeng Jun, "Forty Years of the Chinese Reception of Western Postmodernism: The Process and its Problems," *Chinese Literary Criticism* 3 (2020): 101.

Shouren to choose the road less travelled by—in order to do literary realism full justice, he has launched an overall reevaluation of it not simply as a literary school or period term as evinced by 19th century European realists and their masterpieces, but more pertinently, as a body of knowledge firmly grounded in contemporary literary expressions and theoretical ramifications.

In “On Constructing the Basic Theory of Literary Realism,” an article coauthored with Liu Yang in 2023, he encapsulates his fundamental approach to literary realism into four concepts and four pathways in an attempt to reconfigure the theoretic foundation for the lower-cased “realism” which is disparate from the capitalized “Realism” specifically referring to the literary movement between 1830s and 1890s. In his theoretical framework, *reality* or the way that reality is constituted sets the epistemological cornerstone for literary realism. Derived from the Latin word “realis,” the word “reality” points to a double-fold antithetical interpretation as being defined either as “what is autonomous, independent of subjective conditions and the process of knowledge—in short, external to the knowing subject and therefore endowed with an extramental being” (Courtine 884) or what is empirically perceived through the senses and “a priori modes of knowledge” (Kant 157). While giving both classic interpretations their proper due, Wang Shouren and his coauthor replace the conventional clear-cut division of objective and subjective realities with a dynamic understanding of the Real or “the strange shapes of the unwarped primal world” (Zizek 207) through the psychoanalyses and ideological criticism rendered by Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Zizek, Terry Eagleton.

As Shields observes in the same manifesto that “[t]he mimetic function in art hasn’t so much declined as mutated” (73), the age-old term *mimesis* transfigured as such is deemed the second pillar concept in Wang Shouren’s reconstruction of literary realism. Tracing the development of *mimesis* along the timeline of western aesthetics from the classical philosophers like Plato, Aristotle to the 20th century seminal figures like Erich Auerbach, Tzvetan Todorov, Paul Ricoeur, Richard Walsh, Lubomír Doležel, he brings to light the mutability of the aesthetic term which has gained a new lease of life through crossing paths with stylistics, semiotics, epistemology, possible world theory and so on. It has to be noted that the term *mimesis* in his theorization has gone a long way from the myth of one-to-one correspondence between the word and the world and is reinterpreted as a “dynamic and expansive” (Liu and Wang, “On Constructing the Basic Theory of Literary Realism” 17) discursive realm open to reevaluation.

The idea of *truth* or staying true to life is made another cornerstone in Wang Shouren’s edifice of literary realism. To pin down the concept of truth in the

evolving history of literary realism from its early manifestation in the 19th century European literature, theoretical travel during China's New Cultural Movement, metamorphoses in the twentieth-century high modernism as well as postmodernism, and current shape in the post-truth era, his article "Realism and Truth" (2023) argues that truth in literature, as a synthesis of empirical perception and rational cognition, should be gauged primarily from the perspective of Marxist materialism which sees literary truth as "a transcendent true knowledge based upon faithful depiction of humanity and real life" (15). It hinges upon a contract of common understanding between the author and the reader regarding the real life. On the one hand, it is upon the author to seek out the "experiences to which the fixed forms do not speak at all, which indeed they do not recognize" (Williams 130); while on the other hand, the real life depicted by the author is capable of resonating with the reader's state of mind.

Although standing seemingly opposite to truth, the notion of *fiction* is treated on par with its antithesis in Wang Shouren's reconceptualization. Diametrically different from falsehood, fiction has been discovered as a literary discourse in concordance with the rise of the English novel in general and the realist novels in particular according to Catherine Gallagher. Although fiction was used "as the diacritical mark of its[the novel's] differentiation" (Gallagher 340), it was nevertheless depended upon to tell "what may happen, —what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity" (Aristotle 35). The era of modernity which sees the burgeoning of the middle class also encourages disbelief, speculation and credit among the same group of people who enjoy the imaginary space or recognizably "frank fictionality" in realist fiction. Therefore the claims to truth and fiction are in fact mutually conducive to enhancing the novel's emotional and textual appeals. In the eyes of Terry Eagleton, few things exemplify the interweaving between utterances and activities than realist fiction for "they act as a kind of phenomenology, reinvesting language with a wealth of experience which mainstream philosophy tends to abstract from it" (159). Fiction, in the last analysis, enriches life experience and constitutes a form of truth.

Building on the four key terms as theoretic cornerstones, Wang Shouren also proposes four major pathways in his foundational approach to realism. The cognitive dimension of realism has been repeatedly confirmed by Karl Marx and his followers since the heyday of the 19th century realism. In the light of their advocacy for realism's extraordinary cognitive value, he picks up a formalist line of critique on two fronts. On the one hand, he focuses on the subtle changes of visual description as the core index to gauge the shifting valences of literary realism as an epistemological discourse

in his article “On the Cognitive Dimension of Literary Realism” (2022). With the advent of photography towards the end of the 19th century which endorses literary realism as “partners in the same cultural project” (Armstrong 26) or practically owes its emergence to “the coming of realism in the visual and literary arts” (Brooks 86), a more creative and dynamic engagement between literature and the world is hence made possible to supersede a conventional reflective relationship which often turns on the age-old metaphor of mirror. On the other hand, he highlights the metonymic/metaphoric axes of language functioning raised by Roman Jakobson (1956) and later developed by Pam Morris (2013) so as to explore the cognitive pattern characterizing realism till the present day.

The aesthetics of realism, the second pathway listed on Wang Shouren’s theoretic agenda, has drawn divided opinions in the western academia in the past century. Although Fredric Jameson saw realism essentially split apart between its cognitive and aesthetic statuses,¹ Wang Shouren’s co-authored article “On the Aesthetic Dimension of Realism” (2022) presents a rewarding attempt to tackle with the two contradictory claims of realism at once. He returns to the subject of visual description as the ground zero of the aesthetic controversy over realism. By making a departure from Georg Lukács’s oft-quoted “Narrate or Describe?” (1936) which codified the aesthetic superiority of narration to description as the royal road for literary realism to follow, the article traces the development of post-Lukács criticism on the subject of description exemplified first by Auerbach’s exaltation of everyday life down to minute details in charting the course of western literature’s representation of reality, and then through the rise of thing theory amid the recent turn of New Materialism which restores the vitality and agency to things that are otherwise ostracized through *Verdinglichung*, fetish or commodity fetish in the milling machine of the capitalist economy. Drawing on more recent scholarship by Peter Brooks (2006) who anchors realism in the description of the phenomenological world through “significant things” (Brooks 211) and Frédéric Neyrat (2020) who teases out “a materialism of the excess” (Neyrat 121), the article sheds a dialectical light on the new prospect of realist aesthetics in and beyond the description of things in the 21st century.

The affective turn spearheaded by Brian Massumi, Eve Sedgwick, Gilles Deleuze and others inspires Wang Shouren and his research team to embrace it as the third pathway to realism. Among the theorists of affect, they pay particular attention to Fredric Jameson who takes the lead in galvanizing academic attention

¹ See Fredric Jameson, “Reflections in Conclusion,” *Aesthetics and Politics*, edited by Ronald Taylor, London: NLB, 1977, 198.

toward the affect of realism as evinced by his *Antimonies of Realism* (2013). Identifying affect as one of the twin sources of realism, Jameson taps into it as a register for the rise and fall of the 19th century realism. In Wang Shouren's theoretic conception, the ebb and flow of realism in the long river of literary history could be likewise charted from the perspective of affect. Chen Bo, an affiliate with his realism project, boldly extends the affective perspective to draw the contour of realism from the rise of the novel in the 18th century to the present day. In the article she contributed to the special issue of *Studies in Linguistics and Literature* on "Reality and Representation" guest-edited by Wang Shouren and Xu Lei in 2022, Chen conducts a symptomatic reading into the affective manifestation of realism which took its origin in the 18th century, came into fruition in the 19th century and now enjoys proliferation and multiplication in contemporary literature.¹

Last but not least, Wang Shouren's theorization of literary realism also involves an intermedial dimension in the context of the rapid development of media studies accelerated by interdisciplinary momentum in the recent decades. Indeed, it is almost a platitude for critics to acknowledge the mediality as a substantial property of realism. One recent example might be found with Dorothee Brike and Stella Butter who call attention to realism's "media-specific forms and traditions" (3) in their introduction to *Realisms in Contemporary Culture: Theories, Politics and Medial Configurations* (2013). For them it is necessary to keep in mind that "'realism' in the theatre does not necessarily mean the same as 'realism' in film or in the novel" and yet meanwhile "evolving notions of what should be seen as 'realistic' in different media can be related in interesting ways" (3). However, despite the editors' professed interest in finding out the relations among variously configured realisms through different media, most contributors to their edited book volume merely dwell on the realist expression through a distinct medium such as reality theatre and mockumentary. In Wang Shouren's reconceptualization of realism, the "interesting ways" for medium-specific realisms to interact or counteract with one another will be brought into sharp focus because "intermediality equips readers with more means to approach the semiotic network of reality through mixing, referring, transcribing, etc." (Liu and Wang, "On Constructing the Basic Theory of Literary Realism" 20). For him, the pathway of intermediality holds the key to the prospects for the study of literary realism which he firmly believes resonates with the present epoch of digital media featuring cyberspace, virtual reality, AI technology, etc..

1 See Chen Bo, "The Affective Dimension of Realism," *Studies in Linguistics and Literature: Reality and Representation*, Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2022, 41.

Traversing Postmodern Realism: Crossing the Realism/Modernism Divide

Although Wang Shouren gets down to systemically reconceptualize literary realism only in recent years, his academic forays into realist literature actually started from the end of the last century when he set out to examine the transformation of 19th century realism in postmodern fiction. His textual analyses point to a new continuity rather than rupture of the realist tradition in post-war western literature, hence crossing the divide between realism and modernism which is otherwise deemed antithetical by many literary historians.

Being an established scholar trained in the study of English literature, Wang Shouren's ambition to outline the development of realism in foreign literary history was even shown in his first articles about realism. In this early research published between 1998 and 2007, his discussion on literary realism was mainly based on his extensive readings into postwar Anglo-American literature sidelined with occasional examples from Italian (e.g. Umberto Eco) and Latin American literature (e.g. García Márquez). With a host of English and American authors ranging from John Fowles, Amy Tan, Toni Morrison, Robert Coover, Don DeLillo, Philip Roth, E. L. Doctorow, to William Vollmann in perspective, he intends to override "the death sentence" passed by the modernists on the 19th century European realism by delving into the realist momentum variously and tactfully continued in postmodern literature.

In the article "On Literary Realism in the Twentieth Century" (1998) published in *Foreign Literature Review*, the most influential peer-reviewed academic journal of foreign literary studies in China, Wang Shouren emphasizes realism not as "a period concept" (Wellek 2) applicable only to the 19th century European realism, but rather, as a constant mode of writing which has spanned the development of western literature for centuries. As a general principle underlying creative writing, realism, or the impulse to the go after the real, bears witness to a variety of literary approaches to reality in the twentieth century, i.e., socialist realism in former USSR, "D'un Réalisme Sans Rivages" (Realism without borders) in France, neo-realism in the US, magic realism in Latin America, etc.. He holds that literary realism ultimately hinges upon the notion of "the real" which can be best illustrated by Louis Althusser's analysis of ideology for all its sophisticated relations to reality. Poised between illusion and allusion, ideology in the last analysis is intended to represent objective reality although the real is never a simplistic reflection of truth but a recognition of the internalized notion of the real as a result of ideological interpellation. Therefore the real that writers hanker after is deeply entrenched in the dominant ideology of the given historical moment and kept in constant conversation

with fictionality and illusion.

In the next article “Realism, Modernism and Postmodernism” (1999) coauthored with He Ning and published one year later, Wang Shouren continues his exploration into the shifting notion of the real as seen through the trajectory of realism, modernism and postmodernism. In 19th century classical European realism, authors like Balzac and Dickens set high store by minute depiction of material life as well as linear and coherent progression of plot in order to entice the reader to take the story for real, whereas for modernists who found traditional realists incapable of capturing life itself, by breaking away from the linearity, stability and closure of plot movement, they redefined the real as the authentic representation of characters’ psychologies and inner personalities. As a corrective to modernism, postmodernist literature rose in the late 1950s and early 1960 which “interrogates the real for its realness” and revels in “laying bare the fictionality of the text” (Wang and He 194).

His first two articles on realism were later reprinted in *Xinhua Digest* No. 2, 1999 and No. 4, 2001 respectively and exert wide influence on scholars of foreign literature in China. It has to be noted that what underlies Wang Shouren’s impressive erudition in postwar American literature is a major national research project of compiling *Literary History of the United States* (2002; 2019) in four volumes which he undertook with his colleagues from the English Department of Nanjing University and has been highly esteemed as “the largest-scale study into American literary history so far” (Fang 172) and “a landmark work of the scholarship on American literary history since China’s Reform and Opening-up” (Shen and Wang 2015). In particular, he was responsible for writing the fourth volume which chronicles the development of American literature from 1945 to 2000. Based on extensive readings into post-war American fiction, he believes that realism has found special relevance to the literary imagination of many prominent American writers since the 1960s when the experimentalists gradually gave way to a new wave of realist writers ranging from Saul Bellow, John Cheever, Bernard Malamud, Jack Kerouac, John Updike, Robert Stone, Doctorow, Coover, DeLillo, etc. Even with leading experimentalists like John Barth and Thomas Pynchon, a stylistic switch from dedicated formal innovations to growing concerns over real life and societal issues are manifest in their novels published in the 1970s.¹ Such a turn is never a simplistic revival of conventional realism, but emerges as a new development which integrates “innovations with traditional perspective on the real and narrative mode” while showing full respect for “complete plots, coherent narratives and readable

¹ See Wang Shouren, *Literary History of the United States* Vol. 4, Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Languages and Education Press, 2002, 243.

stories” (244). By taking stock of the rise of neo-realism in contemporary American literature, he also identifies three factors that are contributive to the new trend, i.e. close attention to changing social life, women’s growing awareness of their living conditions, and the rise of the American ethnic literature.

Drawing on the survey of neo-realism in contemporary American literature, Wang Shouren and his coauthor Q. S. Tong make a step further to use the new term “postmodern realism” to characterize some of the American novels published in the early 21st century in the article “On American Postmodern Realist Fiction” (2007). This time, he approaches DeLillo, Roth, Doctorow again, but for their more recent works: *Cosmopolis* (2003), *The Plot Against America* (2004), *The March* (2005), etc.. He especially enlarges upon the concept “postmodern realism” proposed by Jose David Saldivar in *The Columbia History of the American Novel* (1991) who took it as a result from Magic Realism’s influence on contemporary American literature, and identifies it as a common denominator for the novels under scrutiny. Sharing a serious attitude towards real life and a dedication toward the art of storytelling vested with an instructive import, these novels eschew the language games, absurd episodes and deliberate estrangement from everyday life favored by the former avant-gardists; instead, they “continue the convention of the 19th century realist novel while imbibing the self-consciousness and self-reflexivity upon the process of writing itself as often seen in modernist and avant-garde fiction” (Wang and Tong 50), thus turning over a new leaf in the development of literary realism.

Malcolm Bradbury ascribes such combination in postmodernist fiction to the dialectical nature of the novel as “[it] especially bear[s] on polar distinctions that have long been made—between, on the one hand, the novel’s propensity toward realism, social documentation and interrelations with historical events and movements, and on the other hand with its propensity toward form, fictionality, and reflexive self-examination” (*The Novel Today* 8). The oscillation of the novel between the two reputations in the twentieth century is perhaps most drastically shown in the swerve of modernism; but postmodernism in American literature confirms the way that the novel is capable of treading between past realism and naturalism in American fiction and the experimental ground it has broken. Or seen from David Lodge’s structuralist point of view, two polar modes of modern writing, i.e. the metaphoric and the metonymic, somehow both find ways into the écriture of the postmodernist fiction (Lodge 270) but operated by subversive strategies like contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness, excess and short circuit in order to work out “a certain balance or symmetry” (296). On account of the de facto role that realism plays in sustaining postmodernism’s rule-breaking status, Wang

Shouren's textual approach to the Anglo-American literary histories shows that, instead of taking a stand in the realism-versus-modernism polemics such as the one waged in the mid-twentieth century by Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Ernest Bloch and others, it is perhaps more rewarding and meaningful for a contemporary literary scholar to examine the mimetic impulse that has actually shaded into the poetics of postmodernism.

Toward a Glocal Vision of Realism: Building the Chinese Scope of View

As a preeminent Chinese scholar of foreign literature, Wang Shouren is always keenly aware of his academic mission to build the world-class discipline of foreign language and literature with Chinese characteristics. To achieve that end, he believes it necessary to broaden one's scholarly scope to a global scale while staying firmly attentive to the local needs and cultural development in China. For him, the study of literary realism presents the best opportunity to arrive at a global vision from the Chinese scope of view, hence enacting the integration of internationalization and localization of literary studies.

In the world republic of letters charted by Pascale Casanova (2007), the dominance of the major literatures over the minor ones is most evident in the hegemony of European realism which see its fruition in "the modern bourgeois realist novel [that] emerged and flourished in a literary world-system dominated by the cultural capitals of London and, preeminently, Paris" (Cleary 258). However, viewed in the context of Franco Moretti's "conjectural" use of Leon Trotsky's theory of combined and uneven development to reflect on "world literature," the conventional mode of literary realism turning on the Paris-London axis is no longer deemed adequate to accommodate its proliferation and permutation in contemporary world literature. For one thing, scholars find that "the great traditions of English and French realism nurtured in the earlier Franco-British world-system had always been in some respects blinkered and even provincial" (259). And for another, "literary realism has contemporary homes well outside of its nineteenth-century British and French strongholds" (Lye 246), which has been increasingly demonstrated by academic efforts to world realism in a post-colonial context or through the prism of comparative literature. Literature from China, Japan, Africa, Latin America are increasingly put on canvas for comparative study, especially as entities of the geographical pathways into contemporary realism. Moreover, to overhaul the traditional method for the study of realism, a variety of perspectives informed by feminism, post-colonialism, intermediality, historiography, etc. are introduced to enliven the discursive arena.

Against such background, it is no mere coincidence that Wang Shouren has

concentrated on literary realism as an overarching topic in his key national research project “*Post-WWII World History and the Development of Foreign Literature*” (2011-2019). As he admitted in an interview that “dedicated to representing social life and the pursuit of the real, realist literature expresses a deep concern about the real world and therefore presents the best entry point to delve into postwar foreign literature” (He and Wang 4), his choice seems most natural which eventually leads to the first volume of the book project *A Study of Post-War Literary Realism* (2019). Divided into ten chapters, the book presents a panoramic view of literary realism across the globe in the postwar era encompassing not only French and Anglo-American literatures, but also German, Russian (USSR), African, Asian, Arabic, Australian and Canadian authors. Just as he wrote in the preface, “postwar realist literature inherits and transcends the time-honored tradition of literary realism while bearing witness to people’s changing perception of it” (17). Postwar realist literature takes on a plural form which can be crystalized in multiple shapes as moral realism, self-conscious realism, neo-realism, regional realism, magic realism, socialist realism, subject realism and so on. For him, the flourishing of postwar realism can be attributed to three factors. Firstly, literature enjoys a special claim to reality which warrants the *raison d’être* for realism. Following a Marxist line of materialist thinking, he insists on the empirical foundation of literature in everyday life as well the referential function of language in keeping with the objective world.¹ Secondly, realism calls for an active and creative role played by the writer whose agency transforms realist literature into an act to engage with the historical process in the postwar era. Breaking apart from the mechanist mimesis or reflection, contemporary realism accentuates the mediation between the economic base and superstructure as manifest in realist literature. Last but not least, the drive for innovation inherent in realism sets it in a perpetual mode of change, hence “flexible, wide-ranging, unstable, historically variable, and radically open-ended” (Gąsiorek 14). Wang Shouren points out that given its internal mechanism and historical situatedness, “literary realism finds itself in constant challenge to and transcendence over old prevalent literary modes; while sublating outworn conventions, it either reforms traditional means of representation or create new methods in recounting historical reality” (Wang, *A Study of Post-War Literary Realism* 23), giving rise to the plurality of postwar realism in world literature.

It has to be specially noted that the compass of Wang Shouren’s realism project has covered an unprecedented range of third-world nations and “minor literatures.”

¹ See Wang Shouren, et al., *Post-WWII World History and the Development of Foreign Literature Volume I: A Study of Post-War Literary Realism*, Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2019, 19.

Apart from magic realism in Latin American literature and post-colonial realism in African literature shaped by Négritude as well as Apartheid and post-Apartheid, Asian realist literature garners particular attention, such as Japanese writers of critical realism and Kenzaburo Oe in particular, subject realism of Korean literature, etc.. Arabic literature from north Africa and the Middle East also enters the discussion of the Asian chapter. Surveying Arabic writers like Naguib Mahfouz, Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi from Egypt, Hanna Mina from Syria, Khaled Barakat from Palestine, the book finds their writings “not confined to the imitation of European realism but rather turns it into an instrument for promoting national identity and revolutionary alliance which can be categorized into a kind of social realism whose theme closely bears on a variety of intense conflicts during the process of decolonization and social life in the Arab world” (550-551).

Obviously in Wang Shouren’s research project, realism holds the common key to unpack the kaleidoscopic pattern of post-war world literature and more pragmatically, it sends the rallying call for convening two international symposiums on world literature in 2018 and 2023 respectively. Both conferences draw over one hundred participants from China, Denmark, the US, Singapore, Sweden, Vietnam, Germany, France, Portugal, Croatia, etc., creating an international forum par excellence for rewarding academic communication. Invited keynote speakers include Svend Larsen and Steen Bille Jørgensen, general editors for *Landscapes of Realism*, Ottmar Ette from the University of Potsdam, Philippe Dufour from the University of Tours as well as distinguished guests of honor—Nobel Prize laureates Jean-Marie Le Clezio and Annie Ernaux. To mark the first international conference on postwar realism, an essay collection *Representation and Reproduction: Literary Realisms Across the Boundaries* coedited by Wang Shouren and Xu Lei was published, comprising twenty-three articles on realist literature which stretches all the way across the Pacific Ocean to the European continent, i.e. from China, Japan, the US, Columbia, Chile, to the UK, France, Norway, and Germany.

As his orbit of academic communication on the subject of literary realism broadens internationally, it has never been clearer that being a Chinese scholar, he has to adopt a Chinese position while carrying out foreign literary studies. In a number of essays, he has reiterated the necessity for a Chinese scholar of foreign literature to enhance his/her awareness of “the Chinese scope of view” in order to make academic innovation and serve the socialist course of our country. By “the Chinese scope of view,” “it primarily means perspective, the scope that the eye can reach,” or in other words, “the Chinese landscape, spectacle, region” (Wang, “On Foreign Literature Research in a New Era” 2); it is all about one’s outlook

and horizon. At the same time, the “scope of view” also means the structure of understanding from which one makes sense of the world; “it is about point of view and perspective,” including “Chinese perspective, Chinese stance, Chinese insights and Chinese resources” (3). When applied to the study of literary realism, the Chinese scope of view therefore consists in tapping into contemporary Chinese literature to step up the project of worlding realism on the one hand, and maintaining a Chinese scholar of interpretation of the world atlas of literary realism in response to China’s practical needs for academic and cultural development.

To build the Chinese scope of view is what has prompted Wang Shouren to investigate into some of the leading contemporary Chinese authors like Yan Lianke in the past few years. In the co-authored article “Mythology, History, and Reality: Mythorealism in Yan Lianke’s *The Explosion Chronicles*” published in *Orbis Litterarum* in 2021, he takes Yan Lianke’s *Explosion Chronicles* (2013) as a case in point to analyze the writer’s loaded concept of “mythorealism” which paradoxically and simultaneously rivets upon the ultimate claim for truth and firm belief in stylistic innovations.¹ Per mythorealism, Yan Lianke seeks to “abandon the superficial logical relations of the real life, pursuing a reality that is ‘non-existent,’ not visible to the eyes, and covered up by reality” (Yan 181). While acknowledging the play of “the foreign stimuli” transported from Latin America’s Magic Realism in Yan’s novel, the article incisively reveals the Chinese literary tradition of manifesting reality inherited by the Chinese author to “tell the local story of China to the world” (Liu and Wang 188).

The article on Yan is actually one of the six topical essays in addition to five other pieces written by Chinese and European scholars from the special issue of *Orbis Litterarum* on “Realism in the Post-Truth Era” hosted by Wang Shouren in 2021, representing one of many successful moves for him to cut a Chinese figure in the international academia. In the introduction to the special issue, he outlines the contemporary development of literary realism against the backdrop of a post-truth era when the mass media, cramming audiences with superfluous information from celebrity gossips down to the infinitesimal details of quotidian life, are no longer capable of telling the true story about the world as it is, but participate in playing up “the visceral over the rational, the deceptively simple over the honestly complex” (d’Ancona 4). Literary realism with its confirmed commitment to the revelation of truth, finds it increasingly challenging to separate the real from the fake while boldly perseveres in adhering to truth and the craft of fiction. Theorists

¹ See Liu Yang and Wang Shouren, “Mythology, History and Reality: Mythorealism in Yan Lianke’s *The Explosion Chronicles*,” *Orbis Litterarum* 4 (2021): 181.

across different cultures have come up with different strategies to approach the vortex of reality in the post-truth era, among which the theory of speculative realism postulated first by Quentin Meillassoux and subsequently substantiated by Graham Harman's Object-Oriented-Ontology cast a new light on our way to perceive man-nonhuman connections. For creative writers, the perennial task to tease out the connections between the word and the world is never intended as a question but an imperative to mobilize them under the banner of experimental realism from which springs magical realism, hallucinatory realism, mythorealism, cinematic realism, ghostly realism, etc..

Conclusion

If for Balzac, Champfleury, Edmond Duranty and other 19th century realists, realism is grounded in a truthful representation of the world which entails studies into "contemporary life and manners by observing meticulously and analyzing carefully" (Wellek 4) as a pronounced departure from "faithful imitation of the masterworks of art" (3), then contemporary realism nurtured by "the relative notion of the real" (Wang, *A Study of Post-War Literary Realism* 21), is strategically poised between truth and fiction, illusion and allusion, whose protean state can be fairly compared to "many heads of the hydra" (Furst 1). The pluralistic nature of realism which has unfolded a scintillating array of possibilities for writers from far corners of the world in turn give rise to a growing momentum among scholars of east and west to zoom in on the ramifications of realism in world literature.

In fact, Wang Shouren's scholarship on literary realism has predated the so-called "new realist turn" (276) hailed by critics like Jed Esty and Colleen Lye from the post-colonial perspective about one decade ago. When editing the second volume of *Twentieth-Century Foreign Literary History* (2004) in the beginning of the century, a book project in five volumes led by Wu Yuanmai who sees realism "holding half of the literary sky in the twentieth century" (Wu 6), he already detects a realist trend which is persistently looming large on the literary horizon in Britain. In his eyes, the connotations of the current realist turn do not merely reside in the application of the post-colonial perspective on peripheral literatures, but more importantly they ineluctably call for a set of conceptual approach to facilitate an overall reevaluation of realism's foundation in terms of four underpinning keywords and from four major pathways. At the same time, such a realist turn does not remain in theory only, but surfaces as the backbone in his whole-range accounts of the post-war literary history of the world in general and of Anglo-America in particular.

And yet a question still needs to be answered before the closing of the present

article: why has it to be the research on literary realism that can particularly bear out the spirit of glocality, a life goal that Wang Shouren has set for his literary scholarship? Being the hallmark of the pinnacle of European literature in the 19th century, the free travel of realism in the atlas of world literature more than anything else speaks volumes for the current context of globalization and renders it possible for present-day literary scholars to confront and reconfigure the existing world literary system largely shaped by world economic system. On that account, literary realism unquestionably merits his attention over the decades for carrying out dedicated and fruitful dialogues with the international academia. And perhaps more to the point, it is not that he has repeatedly found realism on top of his academic concern at different stages of his scholarly career, but quite the other way around: realism has chosen Wang Shouren, a Chinese scholar of foreign literature whose literary upbringing bears the distinct stamp of realism inherited from Chinese modern literature in the revolutionary era, to be an outstanding spokesperson for its contemporary manifestations and transmutations in world literature.

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