

# Reflections on the Pursuit of 'Objectivity' in the Narrative of Literary Historiography

Zhou Weidong 周維東

*Reflexie o hľadani 'objektívnosti' v narácii literárnej historiografii*

*Resumé* Čeliac kríze modernej narácie, literárni historici sa čoraz viac obávajú o 'objektívnosť' rozprávania v literárnej historiografii. Hoci hľadanie 'objektívnosti' si kladie za cieľ minimalizovanie subjektívnych súdov, aby historická narácia sprostredkovala pomerne objektívny obraz, napriek tomuto pozitívnemu významu naráža na pascu relativizmu, literárnej kritiky a komercializácie literatúry, ktoré nemôžeme ignorovať.

*Abstract* Facing the modern narrative crisis, literary historians are increasingly concerned about 'objectivity' of the narrative of literary historiography. The pursuit of 'objectivity' aims at minimizing subjective judgments, so that the historical narrative conveys a relatively objective appearance. In spite of its positive meaning, pursuing objectivity will also encounter the traps of relativism, literary criticism, and the commercialization of literature. The possibilities mentioned above cannot be ignored.

*Key-words* China, 20th c., Literary Historiography · 'Objectivity', Relativism, Commercialization of Literature

Scholarly reflection on literary historiography has expanded from specific perspectives to the construction of a comprehensive and overall critique of all established views about literary history. In the eyes of many contemporary scholars, literary history has become a synonym for power, misinterpretation, or

repression. Trying to break the stereotypes in traditional literary history and its theory, scholars have claimed to invent an ideal literary history. The pursuit of the original environment,<sup>1</sup> of objectivity and of diversity<sup>2</sup> in attempts of infinitely getting closer to the scene of literary history has become a trend in the academic community. This trend can be described as the pursuit of ‘objectivity’ literary historiography, as such models for an ideal literary history sails under different flags. Some scholars believe that the term ‘history of modern Chinese literature’ should be replaced by ‘modern Chinese literary history’, thus including all literatures that have emerged in the space of ‘modern’ and ‘China’, i.e. literature written in classical Chinese (*wenyanwen* 文言文), literature from the ‘Citizens’ Party’ (Guomindang 國民黨; GMD), literature of the school of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies, translated literature, and so forth, in order to form and ‘objective’ picture of literary history.<sup>3</sup>

The quest for ‘objectivity’ in literary history reflects that contemporary scholars are determined to get rid of the plain dualistic way of thought, and to realize cultural diversity in literary research. However, because the pursuit of ‘objectivity’ in literary historiography is still based on a critique of traditional literary history writing, consciously or unconsciously affected by the current

- 1 Chen Sihe 陳思和, »Huifu wenxueshi de yuanshengtai« 恢復文學史的原生態 [Restore the Original Environment of Literary History], *Nankai xuebao* 南開學報 4/2005, 11-13.
- 2 Zhu Shoutong 朱壽桐, »Jiegou wenxueshi de xueshu baquan—wenxueshi xiezuo de duoyangxing« 解構文學史的學術霸權——文學史協作的多樣性 [Deconstruct the Scholarly Hegemony of Literary History—Diversity in Literary History Writing], *Wenyi zhengming* 文藝爭鳴 2/2005, 78-82.
- 3 Zeng Shaoyi 曾紹義, »Shi Zhongguo “xiandai wenxue” shi, haishi “xiandai Zhongguo” wenxue shi?—guanyu Zhongguo “xiandai wenxue” zhishi de yi dian sikao« 是中國“現代文學”史，還是“現代中國”文學史——關於中國“現代文學”治史的一點思考 [Is it the History of Chinese »Modern Literature«, or »Modern Chinese« Literary History? Some Reflections on Handling the History of Chinese »Modern Literature«], *Guangbo dianshi daxue xuebao* 廣播電視大學學報 4/2005, 13-16.

fashion of criticizing modernity from the perspective of postmodern cultural theory, the ideal of 'objectivity' lacks theoretical reflection on its own reliability, and ignores how feasible it is to put it into practice. This essay attempts to question the rationality of the current pursuit of 'objectivity' in literary history from an opposed perspective of reflection.

### I *The Trap of Relativism*

Leftist discourse and the discourse of modernity are the two ideologies that in contemporary China, and especially in literary studies, indeed produced a force shackling researchers' reflection. They oppressed or obscured many literary phenomena, and excluded works that would deserve further research. Therefore, the current upsurge of reflections on the history of literature can be considered a revolt against them. Moreover, under the constraints of those ideologies, literary studies to some extent have become isolated from the then current cultural context, and thus have lost the ability to decode cultural phenomena and to take part in public discourse.

Thus, scholars are quite willing to make reflections on the literary historiography constrained by these two ideologies. However, the positive meaning of such reflections by challenging the underlying mindset may not form a rational foundation for 'objectivity' in literary historiography. Objectifying literary history may abandon the constraints of leftist or modernist discourse in an attempt of constructing an ideal literary history, but it does not mean that an absolute meaning of objectivity can be achieved. Elite habits of thought and of understanding patterns of literature, such as the concept of 'literaricity' (*wenxuexing* 文學性), because they affect the very existence of both literature proper and literary research, will definitely turn the so-called objectivity, genuineness and diversity into only relative categories, and thus dominate how the narrative of literary history will look like. If the scholar reflecting these issues is becoming aware of this, he might also fall into the trap of relativism, and might find it difficult to justify what he is doing.

Leftist literature, literature of liberalism, together with GMD party literature, traitors' literature; modern vernacular literature, together with classical and ancient literature; literature intended for constructing a modern nation-state, has to be read together with the popular fiction for entertainment and the Mandarin Ducks and Butterfly fiction and other popular modes. Any published literature published in a specific period has to be read together with potentially unpublished writings. All of the abovementioned literary patterns of expression from the colourful, complex, and multi-dimensional Chinese literary presence in the 20th century should be taken into consideration in scholarly research, and without prejudice. In difference to existing literary historiography, this new trend of literary research indeed reveals a relatively fair and objective stance, but it still can not totally avoid the biased influence of the elitism complex.

According to Zhong Jingwen 鍾敬文 (1903–2002), three layers can be identified in traditional Chinese: high culture (elite culture), middle culture (public culture) and low culture (popular culture).<sup>4</sup> Although this way of cultural division has lost its original political foundation due to the establishment of People's Republic of China, social stratification in the first half of the 20th century and the current situation determined that three cultural forms still have still been in existence. As for 20th century Chinese literature, left-wing literature, GMD literature, traitors' literature, and works by liberalist writers involved in the modern nation-state establishment, can be said to be the elite literature; shady fiction, Mandarin Ducks and Butterfly school literature, and other popular works can be considered as public literature. That is to say, the so-called 'objective' trend in reflecting literary history is only including elite and public literature, without popular literature. Is there no vulgar and/or popular literature in China in the 20th century? Obviously not! We should not ignore and underestimate Chinese nursery rhymes, ballads, folk music, pop music,

4 Zhong Jingwen, *Zhong Jingwen wenji* 鍾敬文文集 [Collected Works of Zhong Jingwen], 10 vols. (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996–2002), 1 (《Minsu xuechuan》 民俗學傳): 252–253.

internet popular literature, which all are acquiring not only a mighty strength and full growth, but are also influencing the development of elite and public literature. To mention just an example, in the transition from early modern to modern literature, »songs« played a role that may not be discarded. »To enlighten the people's wisdom, writers imitated and created new folk songs«, »school songs«, revolutionary songs and other forms of folk songs that were very popular at the time, and many of these works have been fully equipped with the modern vernacular mode and its stylistic features.<sup>5</sup> In full accordance with stylistic features, scholars of poetry pointed out that the origin of Chinese modern poetry would be Shen Xingong's 沈心工 (1870-1947) 'school song' »Ticao« 體操 (Gymnastics) of 1902, rather than Hu Shi's 胡適 (1891-1962) »Guan bu zhu le« 關不住了 (Not Caged Any Longer) which was once considered as a foundation of Chinese modern poetry's new era.<sup>6</sup>

Ambition goes first, young men,  
Nothing to do with age.  
Brothers! Come on! Let's do soldiers' exercises.

Army officers are drawing out their sword, soldiers are firing their guns.  
Dragon flag are carried by the wind;  
Timbals are pounding, pounding on.

Do exercises, every day and every day,  
To build up your bodies.

- 5 Liu Na 劉納, *Shanbian—xinbai geming shiqi zhi wusi shiqi de Zhongguo wenxue* 嬗變——辛亥革命時期至五四時期的中國文學 [Transformation—Chinese Literature from the 1911 Revolution to the May Fourth Movement] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehuikexue chubanshe, 1998), 72.
- 6 Fu Zonghong 傅宗洪, »Xuetang yuege yu Zhongguo shige de xiandai zhuanxing« 學堂樂歌與中國詩歌的現代轉型 [The School Anthems and the Transition to Modernity in Chinese Poetry], *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 中國現代文學研究叢刊 6/2006, 135-151.

To make contributions in view of the future battle,  
Show high ambitions, young men.<sup>7</sup>

So, if popular literature were not included, so-called ‘objective literary history’ would become self-deceiving objectivity. And in terms of the present literary landscape, the present ‘objective’ literature history should not ignore the rampant popular culture, with popular songs, drama, internet literature, SMS literature, etc. However, scholars concerned are inclined to attach importance only to those popular works with elite culture orientation, and not to care about other popular literary genres that form a vast majority. Most researchers hold biased views on popular literature for its low taste, yet their number is high and they are circulating at a high speed, so that they are difficult to grasp for compilers of literary histories—yet the most important reason remains that many historians of literature are unable to abandon their elitist ideas in order to acknowledge and understand literature in a broader space.

In addition, some scholars tend to ignore the fact that literature itself is a pre-existing concept in literary history. They accept the idea that there is a clear distinction between non-literature and literature, and believe it is self-evident that there are genres like fiction, poetry, essayist prose, drama, etc. However, in current literature, identifying ‘literature’ has become very difficult, because the boundaries between literature and non-literature are becoming blurred. The unique charm of literature is fading, while more and more non-literary works, such as advertising, theoretical writings, news reports, etc. are starting their poetological pursuit. Terry Eagleton’s way to understand literature from a posi-

7 男兒第一志氣高， / 年紀不妨小。 / 哥哥弟弟手相招，來做兵隊操。 / / 賓官拿著指揮刀，  
 / 小兵放槍炮。 / 龍旗一面飄飄， / 銅鼓咚咚咚敲。 / / 一操再操日日操， / 操到身體  
好。 / 將來打仗立功勞， / 男兒志氣高。 Hu Shi 胡適, *Hu Shi wenji* 文集 [Collected Works],  
12 vols. (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1998), 3 (《Wenlun》 文論): 154.

tion of relativism<sup>8</sup> has its influence on reflections on 'literariness' in present literary studies, and is abandoning the traditional understanding of 'Chinese literature'. That is, literature has lost its independent status with clear boundaries, and may only be understood in its political, social, commercial, and other contexts. In our understand, not only fiction, poetry, prose, and drama, but also translation, theory, television, films, advertising, and so forth, should be included into the category of literature and literary history. Without such a full coverage, literary history would still remain under the monism of an unified thinking pattern, and thus move away from the grand narrative of modernity. But this is where the paradoxes appear: It is impossible to completely overcome such monistic pattern, and maybe merely an utopian dream of literary history.

As a consequence, with regard to current literature, the pursuit of literary history and 'objectivity' will meet the insurmountable dilemma of relativity. Its positive significance is obvious when the pursuit of 'objective' literary history is breaking the hegemony of the modernity discourse and the bonds of a left-wing discourse in literature history writing, but the 'objective' itself is relative, thus the pursuit of 'objectivity' is doomed to fail.

## 2 *The Plight of Literary Criticism*

'Objective' literary history should be a structure open to all literary facts that occurred in the respective period. Literature research might face a crisis in the system of criticism, namely whether a unified terminology of literary criticism that can explain all phenomena in the literary field exist or not. If not, will the so-called literature studies be soaked in a chaotic situation, and the literary history become meaningless? The 'Jin Yong phenomenon' [*Jin Yong xianxiang* 金

8 Terry Eagleton, *Ersbi shiji xifang wenxue lilun* 二十世紀西方文學理論 [*Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 1983], tr. by Wu Xiaoming 伍曉明 (Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2007).

庸現象] is a typical example of such facts long ignored in the study of Chinese literature.

In the 20th century, Jin Yong's 金庸 («Louis Cha», b1924) martial arts novels have long been excluded from the mainstream in literary history. Literary historians engaged in serious literature research once refused to acknowledge their legitimate qualification. Jin Yong's works, however, with their large number of readers, represent a breakthrough for the classic martial arts novels, and display a modern consciousness and artistic maturity. Against this background, in 1996, Yan Jiayan (b1933) published a review on six aspects of the modern spirits in Jin Yong's works by adapting serious ways of literature criticism, thus marking the acceptance of Jin Yong and his works in the mainstream of literary history.<sup>9</sup> Although the study of Jin Yong's works is still accompanied by controversy, scholars have highlighted the excellent qualities in his works one by one, and have even compared them with the classical writers of

9 Yan Jiayan 嚴家炎, «Lun Jin Yong de xiandai jingshen» 論金庸的現代精神 [On Jin Yong's Modern Spirit], *Wenxue pinglun* 文學評論 5/1996, 56-64.

world literature, such as Alexander Dumas and William Faulkner.<sup>10</sup> Jin Yong is thought to be a master of Chinese literature, and his works also have been gradually recognized as belonging to the canon of Chinese literature in the 20th century. But, after the 'Jin Yong fever' [*Jin Yong re* 熱], some doubt arises about whether the significance of Jin Yong and his works' modern spirit, the 'depth of personality' [*renxing sbendu* 人行深度], the national consciousness, and the intellectual and artistic lever were really equal, when compared to first-class writers such as Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936), Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896-1981), Shen Congwen 沈從文 (1902-1988) and Zhang Ailing 張愛玲 (1920-1995). It means that if Jin Yong as a popular writer is included into the history of Chinese literature of the 20th century, the unity of literary criticism is broken into two different systems. Lu Xun's 'depth of personality' and Jin Yong's 'depth of personality' are not the same thing. The former refers to the entire Chinese literature of 20th century, and the latter only involves martial arts novels in that period.

- 10 After Jin Yong's value became acknowledged by literary historiography, there are quite a few scholars who try to compare Jin Yong with western literature masters, such as Yan Jiayan, »Si yu busi zhi jian—Jin Yong he Dazhongma xiaoshuo de bijiao yanjiu« 似與不似之間——金庸和大仲馬小說的比較研究 [Between Similarity and Dissimilarity—A Comparative Study of Jin Yong's and Dumas' Novel], *Nanjing shifan daxue wenxueyuan xuebao* 南京師範大學文學院學報 3/2002, 84-90; Li Ming 黎明, »Fukena yu Jin Yong xiaoshuo bijiao yanjiu« 福克納與金庸小說比較研究 [Comparative Study Between William Faulkner's and Jin Yong's Novels], *Xi'nan shifan daxue xuebao* 西南師範大學學報 4/2005, 148-153; Li Ming and Jiang Zhili 江智利, »Renxing niuqu: Fukena yu Jin Yong xiaoshuo de gongtong zhuti« 人性扭曲：福克納與金庸小說的共主題 [Distortion of Human Nature: the Common Theme of Faulkner and Jin Yong's Novels], *Xi'nan shifan daxue xuebao* 西南師範大學學報 3/2006, 69-73; etc. The papers mentioned above have gradually brought Jin Yong's works into the system and category of serious literary criticism and promoted their status, but this inevitably caused an imbalance of Jin Yong works' in the evaluation system.

The 'Jin Yong phenomenon' shows that if we choose to give up any comprehensive idea of literary history by adopting an open structure for literary historiography, the system of literary criticism will be in danger of collapse. One single writer such as Jin Yong has made Chinese literature criticism split into two sets of standards. Suppose all literary facts in the 20th century would be accepted in Chinese literary historiography, too many standards must unavoidably lead literary criticism into a state of disorder.

However the idea of cultural orientation has been suggested by some scholars to correct the above confusion. Putting Jin Yong within the category of mass culture, criticism may thus avoid an imbalance in Jin Yong's evaluation, and ensure the literary criticism and history in order.<sup>11</sup> According to this logic, 'objectivity' in literary history might be realized by introducing the concept of different cultural orientations, in order to ensure normal operations within the system of literary criticism, but in fact this kind of practice would not match with the reflections on the pursuit of 'objectivity' in literary history.

First of all, 'objectivity' in literary historiography advocates an equal attitude to all literary phenomena occurring in a certain period of time, but if the dichotomy of serious *vs* popular literature, or elite *vs* popular literature is rigorously kept, there is no equality between the two. Obviously, current terminology in literary criticism, the tools and methods of criticism, and even the whole system of criticism are based on the idea that there are such things as a serious and elite literary experience, and even the concept of mass or popular literature itself was invented in a context that accepts so-called popular literature as the existence of lower aesthetic level. Therefore, the popular literature and its special features have not acquired equal identity, and not escaped the inferior fate in front of the serious literature. Thus the so-called objective literary history

11 Tian Zhixiang 田智祥, »Wenhua dingwei—Jin Yong wuxia xiaoshuo piping de lilun qianti« 文化定位——金庸武俠小說批評的理論前提 [Confirmation of Cultural Status—Theoretical Premises for the Criticism of Jin Yong's Martial Arts Novels], *Yunnan shehuikexue* 雲南社會科學 2/2005, 123–125.

is just like the superficial build-up, and the relationship between the elite literature and popular literature is just like the one between brilliant flowers and some matching greenery.

In other words, even if the study of mass literature formed its own independent system of criticism, and even if popular literature and elite literature received an equal treatment, the crisis of literary criticism mechanism cannot be totally solved in the pursuit of objective literary history. The first contradiction is how to judge a work if no strict standards between elite literature and popular literature exist. It is acceptable for us to say that Lu Xun's works belonged to the group of elite literature and Jin Yong's works to popular literature according to their own cultural system of representativeness. But when we ask how to judge Lao She's 老舍 (1899-1966), Zhang Ailing's, [Zhou] Weihui's 周衛慧 (b1973), where is the standard? Moreover more separate standards of culture orientations and more independent criticism systems will declare the gradual disappearance of the meaning of literary history.

### 3 *Risks of the Commercialization of Literature*

Literary history is not only the basis for the existence of literature as a research discipline, but has also been shaped by the 'literary canon' and has influences aesthetic habits and tendencies of a whole society. And because literature is the most widely spread and is attracting to broadest audience among all arts, literary norms often become the aesthetic standard of society as a whole, and literary historiography tends to become the aesthetic arbiter of a whole society.

Due to its intervention in aesthetic judgements of a society, literary historiography has a double meaning. On the one hand, writers of literary history usually are elite intellectuals, so literary aesthetic standards with an impact on the society as a whole are promulgated by the elite intellectuals who thus acquire an aesthetic hegemony and will inevitably suppress the diverse aesthetic tempers and interests of a non-elite public. On the other hand, by means of literary historiography, intellectuals obtain the power of criticizing socially established aesthetic judgements, so that it is ensured that the aesthetic tendency will not

completely follow the aesthetic trend favoured by the masses. Oppressed by the aesthetic standards set up by elite intellectuals, the school of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies, the school of New Sensualism [*xin ganjue pai* 新感覺派], and writers such as Zhang Ailing, Shen Congwen, and Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (1910–1998) had long been excluded from literary historiography, and so was the masses' demand for such works, on the grounds that the poor aesthetic orientation had to be dismissed. In fact, those controversial schools and writers have all become incorporated into literary historiography soon after the policy of opening-up and reform was implemented, and thanks to elite intellectuals' unremitting efforts, thus prompting a great aesthetic liberation for the whole society. Present-day reflections on literary historiography have frequently noticed that the potential of intervening on a society's aesthetic judgements has formed a 'power of literary history writing', but have neglected it also means that literary historiography is endowing intellectuals to criticize aesthetic trends favoured by the masses. As the 'power' of literary historiography is decreasing, particularly since the rise of market economy, I think the latter should even be less neglected.

In contemporary China, literary historiography is not the only place for the birth of canonized literary work in an increasingly mature market. By quantitative standards of judgment, such as the number of sales, the click rate, and influence rate evaluation systems, etc., the market has become a new space to canonize works of literature. In fact, many canonized works of contemporary literature, such as Riffraff Cai 痞子蔡 (i.e. Cai Zhiheng 蔡智恆, b1969), *Di yi ci qinmi jiechu* 第一次親密接觸 (The First Intimate Contact; 1998, PRC 1999), Han Han's 韓寒 (b1982), *Sanzhong men* 三重門 (Tertiary Gate; 2000), Guo Jingming's 郭敬明 (b1983), *Meng li hua luo zhi duoshao* 夢裡花落知多少 (The Flowers Down in the Dream; 2003). And even Yu Qiuyu's 余秋雨 (b1946) prose and essays gained their first fame in the market, and then became canonized in society. Yet on the other hand, the present situation of literature historiography is somehow confused, because those works considered as canonized literary works by critics have not been totally and widely accepted by society, and have not necessarily produced any influence that would have resulted in canonization. So for the

moment, elite culture can no longer suppress popular culture any more. Faced with masses' culture, it will quite possibly lose its previous power and function.

Obviously, masses' literature leading the public aesthetic tendency should not be treated as a low-brow and vulgar one, and the classic literature created by elite intellectuals as elegant and high-brow neither. But it cannot be denied that the public aesthetic taste of good and bad is not coherent, and that works of inferior and superior strata coexist in most cases—and that those of lower quality that are hypocritical and morally corrupt have even done great harm to society. The value of works created by the so-called 'godfather' class of writers are not always proportional to their positive influence in society. Thus we should respect the cultural choice of the masses, but should also maintain a critical attitude towards it.

A possible way to ensure that the masses' cultural judgements are going astray is to stick to certain standards of literature historiography. Although a lot of 'canonized works of literature' may be made-up or speculated upon by the market for profit purpose, works with lasting influence have to be accepted by the historiography of literature.

During the past century, that function of literary history has worked for a long time. In Chinese modern history of literature, there are several works that have been canonized, to a certain extent, by the market of their time, such as Guo Moruo's 郭沫若 (1892-1978) poetry collection *Goddessess* (*Nüshen* 女神; 1921), Zhang Ziping's 張資平 (1893-1959) romantic love triangle novels, Zhang Ailing's, Lin Qing's 林青 (1911-1935), Mei Niang's 梅娘 (1920-2013), and Wumingshi's 無名氏 (Bu Ning 卜寧, 1917-2002) metropolitan sentimental novels etc.

If literary historiography does not make any 'selection', and if at the same time many scholars maintain they are just striving for 'objectivity' in describing indiscriminately all literary facts, would it then not become impossible to predict where the the aesthetic interest of a society is turning to? Maybe nowadays nobody is caring about problems of literary historiography. As to the degree of development of present popular culture, it is different from the situation in the first half of the 20th century, as mass culture has now swept over the whole market. Do readers really have the ability to make sound judgements about

various cultural phenomena? Does cultural diversity mean the free spread of mass popular culture without restraints or criticism? Should not literary critics stick to some literary standards and keep a vigilant eye towards a variety of mass popular cultural phenomena? Literary history writing should stay in dialogue with popular culture, so that objective standards and positions may have positive impact on mass culture, and a genuine diversity might arise.

*Sichuan University, College of Literature and Journalism, Chengdu*

*Translated from Chinese  
by Qian Xiaoyu 錢曉宇*