

A Western – Chinese Conjoint Attempt to Surmount the Chinese Wall

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This long-established prestigious British publishing company describes its goals in the present series as “showcasing some of the most intellectually adventurous work being done in the broad field of the economic humanities, putting it in dialogue with developments in heterodox economic theory, economic sociology, critical finance studies and the history of capitalism”.

My first critical question of curiosity arises from the above self-definition of the Palgrave series: what exactly is the difference between “humanities” and “economic humanities”? Is humanities research banished from the series, unless it has something to do with economics?

Especially as the reviewed book is centred on modernism in 20th-century Chinese literary creativity, my second question is: should the background (in the Palgrave series self-definition) not include, apart from the history of capitalism, the (however short) history of communism/socialism?

The physical Great Wall of China, one of the world’s architectural miracles, is in our day visited and admired by numerous Western tourists daily. However, establishing a deeper dialogue with China in the field of humanities is immediately blocked by the need to surmount a much higher wall, the physical-spiritual wall of language (*logos, lingua, tongue, langage, dialect*; in my native Estonian, the short word *keel* means the moving organ in the mouth (producing speech or song or whatever utterance), the native language we speak, as well as language in the imaginary, metaphoric sense, initially used in cultural semiotics, above all).

The younger generations of Chinese, born after the death of the great communist leader Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and the end of the Cultural Revolution, have increasingly managed to learn English, replacing Russian (the earlier main means of communication with the world beyond the ‘Chinese wall’). Apart from belonging to that younger generation of Chinese, professor

Tiao Wang has specialised in English and English-language literature. On her part, she could well cooperate with the experienced US professor and researcher Ronald Schleifer, born a year before Mao Zedong led the Chinese communists to victory over the nationalists to the establishment of the present day Peoples Republic of China (1949).

On the part of the West, however, the premises for a genuine cultural and (more so) literary dialogue look much flimsier. Speaking Chinese fluently is, among Westerners, a very rare feature just because learning Chinese presupposes specialisation and dedication to learning over a substantial part of one's limited lifespan.

The Western insufficiency in this sense is well reflected in the Estonian 'micromodel' of the reception of world literature (the canon, though hesitant and always open and disputable, of major achievements of literary creativity from all parts of the world, big as well as small nations). Whereas there are no major Western (including East-European, especially Russian) writers whose work would be completely missing in Estonian translation, from contemporary Chinese modernist literature (modernist in the widest sense) only two books have so far been translated: the Nobel prize winner Mo Yan's (b. 1955) *Punane sorgo* (红高粱家族, 1986, in English translation *Red Sorghum*; Estonian translation by Märt Läänemets, Tallinn, 2014) and a selection of poetry, *Aeg* (时间; Tallinn, 2016) by Jidi Majia (b. 1961), a prominent Chinese-language contemporary poet, representing at the same time the culture of the Yi

People, one of the numerous Chinese minority nationalities. (I translated a selection from two different translated versions in English; my translation was revised by Taimi Paves, an Estonian orientalist).

Ronald Schleifer's opportunities to read outstanding Chinese literary works in English translation have been far wider than mine in my native Estonian, but even so, Chinese modernist literary works translated into English are supposedly only a tiny part when compared with translations from English into Chinese of American and Western modernist literary works. (By the way, it would have been a good idea to include in the present book a note with some data about the reception of William Faulkner's work in China, in Chinese translation, as well as about other American and Western parallels in the context of the reception of Western modernism in China.)

At least to some extent, the book's unbalance can be understood. On the one hand, there is an extensive overview of Western economic as well as cultural criticism theories (from post-Enlightenment positivism and Marxism to the present day post-Marxist-leftist economic thinking, shattered by postmodern deconstruction and at its best clinging to the latter's rhetoric mannerism – Chapters 1–3) and, on the other hand, a rather limited, a much less ambitiously pondered choice of samples of some representative Chinese

modernist works in narrative fiction and poetry (Qian Zhongshu's (钱钟书, 1910–1998) novel *Fortress Besieged*, 1947; not printed in mainland China till 1980 – Chapter 4; the poetry of Mang Ke (芒克 b. 1950, pen name for Jiang Shiwei 姜世伟) – Chapter 5, and Modernist parallels between William Faulkner and Mo Yan (Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Mo Yan's *Big Breasts & Wide Hips*) – Chapter 6.

In addition, in Chapter 2 there is an effort to analyse late poems by Shi Zhi (食指) (pen name of Guo Lusheng (郭路生), b. 1948) against a background of economic theories, while in Chapter 3 the treatment of a short story by Han Dong (b. 1961), as a sample of 20th century avant-garde poetics, is preceded by references to the budding start of Western semiotics a century earlier.

The imbalance of the book not only originates from the fact that the historical centre, or epicentre, of Modernism in literary creativity (the end of the 19th century and the first thirty years of the 20th century) has long since been firmly located in the West, and the body of Western critical meta-texts on Modernism is literally unmeasurable. It does not emerge either from the fact, mentioned in the reviewed book's introductory chapter, that "The Company Law of the People's Republic of China" (zhonghua renmin gongheguo gongsifa 中华人民共和国公司法) was approved only in 1993, whereas US capitalist corporations have a centuries long history.

Far more radical, far more essential are the sociopolitical differences between the US and China as part of the world's modern (cultural) history.

Though the US had a key role in determining the fate of both 20th-century World Wars in Europe, the US itself did not suffer much from these tragedies. Despite several serious crises, its capitalism persisted and has ever expanded. The consequences of WWII were above all tragically felt in Europe, divided after 1945 into two antagonistic blocks, communism and capitalism. Their immediate repercussions concerned China and several other Asian countries. China had to pass through a series of profound historical convulsions, such as the war against invading Japanese imperialism and its own Cultural Revolution (the final decade of Mao Zedong's life). China has been strongly influenced by Marxist ideology, largely monopolised by the USSR. These sociopolitical convulsions have had a lasting effect both on cultural creativity and on cultural theorising.

Since the mid-1970s, when professor Schleifer started his fruitful academic career at the University of Oklahoma, he has been able to devote his activity to a variety of theoretical interests, contributing at the forefront to the establishment and spread of several novel currents of Western cultural meta-discourses. The US has at the same time been an unrivalled leader in applying the principles of science to the humanities. As sciences, economy and political power have always developed in a deep interdependence and their governing

principles have been increasingly applied to humanities. In sciences and in commerce the new, the novel is always valued more than the old. The new product attracts the consuming masses, hence such terms and notions as ‘economic culture’ or ‘cultural economy’. According to the dreams of market-based capitalist societies and their ideologists, all final products of the sciences, including the humanities, should sell. Theory pioneers, while cultural practices are expected to obey and follow capitalism’s strategies and commands.

This explains the bizarre and hectic abundance of theory in the West, whereas the less astute and mobile ‘socialist camp’ lagged behind, adhering to much simpler and less sophisticated official state ideology, established not as much by business architects as by communist party *politburos*. Yet, thanks to this ‘clumsiness’, there was respect for the cultural creativity of past centuries, especially the classical era, the Renaissance and the broad field of realistic literary creativity.

Business appreciates swiftness, a smart dynamic, quick action and adaption to the fashionable. However, creative culture only in part overlaps with science, as has been convincingly demonstrated in the work of the late founder and head of the Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics (and my former university colleague) Yuri M. Lotman (1922–1993; especially after he introduced the notion of the semiosphere). Contrary to science, culture owed its modification and change to unpredictable “explosions” and “leaps”. These can never be captured by *a priori* abstractions and theoretical schemes. At least in the creative part of the humanities (including all artistic creativity and literary creativity in the first place), theory can only work *a posteriori*. Cultural history is an essential part of cultural theory.

At the USSR’s ‘periphery’ Saransk (the Republic of Mordovia), Mikhail Bakhtin taught a course of European literature and at the same time conceived his perspicacious treatment of the historical typology of fictional narrative (novel). At the USSR’s Baltic ‘periphery’, at the University of Tartu (Estonia), Yuri M. Lotman taught Russian cultural and literary history. On that basis, he conceived his cultural semiotics.

To further deepen the incipient literary-cultural dialogue between China and the West, and also as advice for future research in this line, of which the book by Wang and Schleifer provides an inspiring introduction, I will in the following present some conclusions from my own academic and creative activity. These conclusions are at the same time my intellectual legacy, after spending half a century of my life at the University of Tartu (from December 1973, then still in the deep ‘socialist’ reality of the USSR) teaching courses of Western literature and researching literature (including some chapters of my own native Estonian literature) in comparative contexts.

The topic of my PhD thesis, defended in 1981 at Leningrad, later St Petersburg, University, was “The Picaresque Novel *Guzmán de Alfarache* and the Formation of the Realistic Novel”. While preparing my thesis, I tried from the beginning to grasp the broader context of the genre of the Western novel, the germination of which indeed has a lot to do with late medieval, Renaissance and, even more, Baroque Spanish literature. The first half of the 17th-century Spanish Golden Age is fully comparable to the Modernist explosion in Western creative culture at the start of the 20th century. Spanish Baroque literature comprised a generic and perceptual-aesthetic variety of heterogeneous literary works no other major European literature produced during that epoch. This fact convinced me of the basic and simple truth that cultural-literary creativity (at least at its greatest ‘explosive’ moments) can never directly and in a straight line be reduced to the effect of the economic-ideological conditions of society. The same socioeconomic condition has provoked in artistic creativity a great number of varying, often radically differing responses.

At that time, I tried to read all the theories of the novel that were accessible to me in English, Spanish, Russian, French and German. Among my main intellectual guides were the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955; a “ratio-vitalist”) and the great Russian literary-cultural philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975). Among Ortega y Gasset’s early essays was his *Meditaciones del Quijote: notas sobre la novela*, 1914 (*Meditations on Don Quixote: Ideas on the Novel*). At the same time Ortega (a friend of Salvador Dalí and Federico García Lorca) was one of the first Spanish thinkers trying to philosophically comprehend the essence of both phases of Modernism (the initial symbolist, impressionist, decadent creativity and the later avant-garde phase that came after WWI, including cubism, expressionism, surrealism and other radical artistic currents).

Mikhail Bakhtin’s mature ideas on the historical typology of narrative fiction were above all resumed in his semiotically ideated essay “The Forms of Chronotope and Time in the Novel Genre” (first published in Russian in 1974). His important ideas about the “polyphony of speeches” can be first found in the book *Problems of Dostoyevski’s Poetics* (1929; after the publication of the book Bakhtin was banished by the Stalinist authorities from Leningrad to Kostanai, in Kazakhstan). He introduced the concept of the “carnevalisation” of literature as Nature’s permanent revolt against “official culture” in his extensive monograph *François Rabelais and Popular Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (in Russian 1965).

Naturally, at that time I consulted a wide range of other academic books and found important support for my conception of the Baroque in the work of some other major Russian scholars (such as Leonid Pinski, 1906–1981). There is a common feature in Bakhtin, Pinski and Lotman, the most important Russian

literature philosophers: they focus in their work on some of the outstanding phenomena in the history of Western literary creativity. Establishing a dialogue with major creators (Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare, Pushkin, Dostoyevski) they managed to produce explosive ‘leaps’ in literary scholarship (thus transcending ‘normal’ literary science and theory, which generally moves in some fashionable or officially established trend).

When writing my doctoral thesis, I was still under the spell of the sociologically inclined art theory of the German-Hungarian art historian Arnold Hauser, as well as of José Antonio Maravall, a Spanish (cultural) historian, directly influenced by Hauser’s ideas. Gradually I started to notice obvious simplifications that were often concomitant in sociologically oriented theories. These tended to ignore the aesthetic and philosophic factor in literary creativity.

On the other hand, the formalist stem in cultural theories repelled me from the very beginning. Indeed, I was fond of the way the avant-garde modernist writers managed to experiment with the form of their works. They often successfully made their philosophy emerge not only from the ideological content, but also from the very form of their work. However, the fact that the degree of a formal experiment could strongly vary from one work to another in modernist writers convinced me of the limited nature of formal (including linguistic) artistry.

Whatever the exterior features and connections with other fields of the arts and sciences, it is useful to bear in mind that the primary internal, intrinsic interdisciplinary feature of any major literary work has been its symbiosis of aesthetics and philosophy. In their intense mutual dynamic, ethical dimension and values are generally revealed.

The authors of the reviewed book mention that images in the work of 20th-century modernists often overlap with aspects of some great writers of the past. Thus for instance, in English-language modernists such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and unnumbered others, William Shakespeare’s presence is a continuous feature. They call it “semantic overlapping”. It is indeed a very common feature in literary creativity. It can be treated as influence or intertextuality, but my own observation is that it has the potential to reach far beyond, reappearing spontaneously and without any possibility of direct contact between creative texts in writers separated from one another by time, space and language.

I have tentatively called this phenomenon “transgeniality” – a coincidence of creative sensibility and (sometimes) even of a world view. Thus, I have found “existential-holistic lyrical transgeniality” occurring between Juhan Liiv (1864–1913), one of the major Estonian poets of the past, and the Yi-Chinese contemporary poet Jidi Majia (b. 1961) (see my book *Critical Essays on*

World Literature, Comparative Literature and the "Other" (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019)).

The epicentre of Western Modernism is fairly large, reaching far beyond the West. Before its repercussions in post-Mao China, modernism spurred several important 'after-leaps' in world literature. Thus, after WWII (during the 1960s and 1970s) extremely influential currents of neorealism and existentialism emerged, intertwined and spread (in narrative prose fiction, cinema). Polyphonic narrative realism – the arch-author of which, Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616), was at the border the late Renaissance and the Baroque – has never lost its potential.

Immediately after the surge of neorealism and existentialism, and in part coinciding with them in time, another powerful creative-literary current erupted far from the US and Western Europe, in Latin America. I am not sure that Mo Yan could ever have written his novels, at least his first successful work *Red sorghum*, without reading the novel *A Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) by Gabriel García Márquez, the Colombian epitomic creator of the current of magical realism and a most faithful heir of Cervantes' realistic magic in world narrative fiction.

Perhaps Mo Yan could tell us, if by chance he had even cast a glance at a certain neo-realistic novel proceeding from the small European Baltic 'periphery', that he could read in Chinese translation? Its author was one of Estonia's major writers in emigration (in Canada), Arved Viirldaid (1922–2015). Viirldaid's chef-d'oeuvre, the novel *Ristideta hauad* (*Graves without Crosses*, 1952) is based on the author's own experiences in WWII. It transmits from multiple points of view, including that of a mother, a woman – the wife of the main character –, the Stalinist terror in Estonia, just in the same way Mo Yan has reflected the horrors under Japanese military intervention and occupation in China. (魏爾雷, 被出賣的一代. 譯 馮幼衡. 台北: 黎明文化, 1981, 356 pp. (Bey cho mai de i dai. Translated by Feng You Heng. Taipei: Li Ming Wenghua Shiye Gunsi, 1981. 356 pp.))

To conclude, we have to be deeply thankful to Ronald Schleifer and Tiao Wang for their pioneering research on the phenomenon of modernism, more precisely Western modernism's continued fertile "transgenial" repercussion far from its historical epicentre. Let me hope it stimulates further research on modernism by younger scholars not only in China and the US, but also in other parts of the world, enhancing dynamics in the translation of literary works and carrying on the spirit of creative freedom in all nations and their native languages.

Every nation creates its own canon of world literature. All national world literature canons help humankind acquire an ever deeper awareness of the meaning of its existence.