

# *A Survey of Contemporary Literature of China's West*

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**T**HE NOTION OF THE CONTEMPORARY West China literature originated in the 1980s when in 1982, the literary magazine *Yang Guan* proposed to start Dunhuang Arts as a particular school of literary and artistic works. In 1983, poets and critics in Gansu and Xinjiang were engaged in discussions of the emergent New Frontier Poetry. In 1984, critics such as Sun Keheng and Tang Qi pointed out that the newly emerging “West poetry” is a “new-type literature of locality.”<sup>1</sup> After the screening of Wu Tianming’s feature film *Life*, adapted from the novel by Lu Yao, critics discerned convergences of the movie and the American Western films, and proposed the concepts of the Chinese Western films<sup>2</sup>.

Such an overflow of keenness on the West China’s literary landscape was almost like a sandstorm overwhelming the West China, or in fact the whole country. Writers and critics responded with a passion that was close to a frenzy. The influential literary journal *Contemporary Art Thoughts* published in 1985 a special issue entitled *A Forum on West China’s Literature*. In the same year in July the Literature Associations of the 5 provinces in the North-west, in conjunction with relevant film studios and local literature associations convened the First Conference on the Arts in West China in the frontier city, Yining of Xinjiang. Since then, the notion of West China literature was officially established, incurring active writing and criticism nationwide.

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<sup>1</sup> Sun Keheng, *An Anthology of the Contemporary New Poetry in China's West* (Lanzhou, Gansu People's Publishing House, 1986) 32

<sup>2</sup> He Chungeng, “The Sun Rises from the West: on the Birth and Development of China’s Western Movies” in *Tang Du Academic Journal*, No. 1, 2003



The 1980s and early 1990s were the peak of the genre, with the emergence of New Frontier Poetry, West-themed essays, novels of military life in West China, pioneer novels, novels about vagrant people and novels of local country colours. The end of the 1980s was already witnessing a cooling-down of the heated interest in this field, with less theoretical fervour and fewer writers switching to the genre. In the 1990s there had been a substantial and steady output of poetry, novels and essays flourishing the flag of West China literature.

Into the 21st century, West China literature has been gaining momentum. After Shi Shuqing, Chen Jiming and Jin Ou, the three writers from Ningxia, dubbed by the critics as the “three trees from Ningxia” made their notability in the early 2000s, new writers from Gansu including Ye Zhou, Yi Zhou, Wang Xinjun, Ma Busheng, Yan Yinxiu, Li Xuehu, Xue Mo and Xiang Chun were collectively nicknamed the eight Stallions of Gansu, who received support in 2005 from the Gansu Literature Institute and the literary journal *Shanghai Literature*. In 2008, Jia Pingwa’s *Qin Qiang*, or *Shaanxi Opera* beat the 5 novels submitted by Gansu writers to win the 7th Mao Dun Literary Award. Some of the critics argue if Shaanxi Province could be regarded as West, and if its writer Jia Pingwa could be categorised as a West China writer, but in *Qin Qiang* there is a strong sentiment reflecting the spirit of the West part of the Chinese interior.

For decades people have been discussing the so-called “spirit of the West” which is supposed to be adopted to define West China’s literature. Different opinions give the notion different interpretations, but in essence, the spirit of the West is summarised by the critic Li Xing as reflecting “a natural consciousness of existence, a religiosity of beliefs, a combined consciousness of centrality and marginality used to position the self, a heroic spirituality, and a sense of solitude in the inner depth of the mind.”<sup>3</sup>

In fact the literature in West China is a new growth out of the emergence of the economic reform and opening starting in China in the late 1970s, with the development of a market economy, and the widening of the scission between urbanity and rural life. The land now exists and persists only in the memory, fading and disintegrating together with the folk culture, traditionality, religious beliefs, practices and morality.

The younger generation in West China are caught in a conundrum to choose to leave the home of nativity, to be exiled to the fast developing urban areas, or to persevere in the hometown with persistence and obstinacy. Lost in the city and without a clear sense of purpose and motivation, such exiles, imposed or self-chosen, are like escapes and fleeing, which constitute one of the most important themes in West China literature in recent decades. A strong infectious realism imbues writings by writers such as Jia Pingwa and Xue Mo.

As mentioned previously, West China literature made its debut in the 1980s, starting from films and spreading into the literary arena, inviting debates, discussions and criticism nationwide. A generation of writers such as Wang Meng, Zhang Xianliang, Zhang Chengzhi, Lu Yao, and Jia Pingwa influenced the post-Cultural Revolution China with their novels, novellas, short stories, poetry and essays. However, Wang Meng ultimately left his small courtyard house in Yili of Xinjiang to move to Beijing, finally becoming China’s Culture Minister. Lu Yao passed away of liver diseases. Lu Tianming and Zhang Xianliang broadened their scope of writing into literature that is beyond West China to embrace the panorama of China’s modernity. The sudden imposed closure of the literary journal *Contemporary Art Thoughts* in July 1987 heralded a period of muteness in literary criticism due to suppressing rules from government agencies after the

<sup>3</sup> Li Xing, “The Living Conditions in China’s West in the Contextuality of Modernity” in *Fiction Review*, No. 1, 2005

so-called “anti bourgeoisie liberalism” campaign, which, however, in its turn induced among writers and critics an in-depth reflection of the nature, significance and characteristics of West China literature.

What contributes most to the making of West China literature is obviously the place, which consists of the unique topography of forests, rivers, deserts, and wilderness. In history the Yellow River or Huang He River was regarded as the cradle of the Chinese civilisation. From the Zhou and Qin dynasties to Han and Tang, the city of Chang’an, now known as Xi’an, was the political, economic and cultural centre for the Han nationality. It was also a hub of convergence of different cultures, from which the Silk Road started to thread into Central Asia, leading to a multiculturalism that was diverse and colourful. After the collapse of the Tang Dynasty which was followed by civil wars and invasions, the importance of the Silk Road diminished. The Western parts of China began to be linked with concepts and acts evoking the frontier and barbarism.

After 1949, the Western parts have been attached with great political, economic, and strategic importance. In 1986, the 7th Five Year Plan was endorsed by the Central Government, in which for the first time China’s economic development zone was divided into 3 parts, namely the East, the Central, and the West. Nine provinces and autonomous regions are included in the West, which are Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet, Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xinjiang. Among the 9 provinces and autonomous regions, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Xizang are in the South-west, while Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xinjiang are in the North-west.

With regard to histories and cultures, the two areas are drastically different. However, the concept of the West in China generally refers to the 5 provinces and autonomous regions in the North-West. Although in terms of the literary West, there has not yet been a finalised consensual definition, the 5 provinces and autonomous regions still take a predominant position.

In the process of the re-discovery of the West, corresponding to archaeological, geological and political activities and movements is the enlightenment and self-awareness of the local literature. In the 1950s, in answer to the government’s call for the development of the Greater West, literature by local writers and/or about the local life was highly politicised. Poetry by Wen Jie, essays by Li Ruobin, and novels by Xu Huaizhong achieved their popularity and influence in the country. After the Cultural Revolution, literature shed its shackles at last, and started a journey of self-awareness and self-exploration. In the early 1980s, two influential literary journals *Yangguan* and *Contemporary Art Thoughts* proposed the idea of West China literature. In 1983, the renowned film critic Zhong Dianfei raised the concept of Chinese Western films. Like an explosion, arts and literature in West China were stormed with new spirits and passions. *Contemporary Art Thoughts* organised a forum in its 3rd number of 1985, which provided an all-round panorama of the literary scene in West China. In July 1985 the First Conference on the Arts in the West China was held in the frontier city of Yining. The journal *Xinjiang Literature* was renamed *China West Literature*. All these activities helped put West China literature on the map of Chinese literature.

As mentioned before, the late 1980s witnessed a recession of criticism on West China literature and a draining away of writers engaged in this particular genre. However, some of the reviews and criticism were clear-minded conclusive study of the movement in the 1980s. One notable work is Yu Bin’s *A Survey of West China’s Literature*. After the closure of the journal *Contemporary Art Thoughts* West China literature lost its most important stronghold. West China literature saw its revival with the emergence of young writers in the 1990s. However, they were no longer blessed with the influence the writers of the ‘West’ used to enjoy in the 1980s. In

1993, five publishing houses in Beijing published Chen Zhongshi's *White Deer Plain*, Jia Pingwa's *Abandoned Capital*, Gao Jianqun's *The Last Hun*, Jing Fu's *Eight Miles of Love and Hatred*, and Cheng Hai's *Love of Destiny*, heralding a resurgence of West China literature which had been affected by the death of Lu Yao and Du Pengcheng.

The genre of the novel once again regained its unshakable position in the literary scene. Literarily and commercially successful, they were restrained within the locale and topography of West China, no longer achieving national influence as their predecessors. Guan Weizhong questions the nature of their writings as true West China literature. "Those writers from Shaanxi write about life of the Guanzhong Plain. Are their works part of West China's literature? The answer is plain to any eye... Therefore what Western colours, what Western flavours can we detect?"<sup>4</sup> Guan's views are representative of many critics at the time, marginalising Shaanxi and its writers beyond the fringe of West China literature.

Since 2000, West China literature started to flourish again. Different from the 1990s when Shaanxi writers dominated the scene, West China literature thrived in different provinces and autonomous regions. Hong Ke, Dong Libo, and Liu Liangcheng from Xinjiang, Chen Jiming, Shi Shuqin, and Jin Ou from Ningxia, Jia Pingwa and Gao Jianqun from Shaanxi, and Xue Mo and Wang Xinjun from Gansu became new pillars for West China literature in the new millennium.

In the recent decade, criticisms and studies on West China literature have also grown significantly. *A History of Modern Literature in West China* edited by Ding Fan and *A Critical History of Contemporary Novels in West China* by Li Xinyang broadened the scope of the research on contemporary Chinese literature, established the defining notion of the Cultural West, and introduced West China literature into the realm of academic studies of literary history. However, these two books focused on the 1980s when West China literature first flourished, failing to reflect adequately what has been developing in the new millennium. Moreover, *A History of Modern Literature in West China* includes Tibet and Inner Mongolia into the arena of West China literature, while excluding Shaanxi.

In fact, since the notion of West China literature came into being, scholars and academics have been making their own definitions according to their own needs and backgrounds, therefore obfuscating the classification of West China literature. Shaanxi scholars such as Xiao Yunru and Li Xing believe that since the Song and Yuan Dynasties, Shaanxi has formed a two-way westward identification and eastward identification with Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai and Xinjiang. In other words, the above-mentioned literary histories are pioneering works while still replete with shortcomings.

Generally speaking, studies of West China literature since the new millennium have the following features:

Firstly, for more than 30 years, scholars and critics from the West have been working actively to bring West China literature into the landscape of Chinese literary criticism. Notably there are Li Xing, and Zhao Xueyong from Shaanxi, Lei Da and Ma Yongqiang from Gansu, and the academics of the Department of Chinese of Nanjing University led by Ding Fan. Most of the leading academic literary journals in this area concentrate in western cities such as Xi'an and Lanzhou. Of course *Tang Du Journal* and *Lanzhou University Journal* are no match to *Contemporary Art Thoughts* in the 1980s in terms of the breadth and width of the research, no longer playing a

<sup>4</sup> Guan Weizhong, "Western Literature: in the Soil of Chinese Western Culture" in *Contemporary Art Thoughts*, No. 5, 1985

leading role in the literary criticism nationwide. However, such critical inputs have contributed to the theoretical renaissance of West China literature.

Secondly most of the researches are confined to historical studies of the glories of the 1980s with fewer new breakthroughs. In 2003, *Tang Du Journal* organised a journal forum on the topic of "China's West Literature in the context of Globalisation", trying to shed lights on the characteristics and developments of the West China literature in the new era. However, although this was a constructive forum offering multiple vantage perspectives, it did not draw significant interest from the academic circles nationwide. Critics and academics paid more attention to individual writers rather than the West China writers as a group.

In this regard, studies of China West literature are both retrospective and prospective with new writers emerging but with styles, themes and viewpoints different from their predecessors.

In Ding Fan's *A History of Modern Literature in West China*, he asserts that "one of the most important features of West China literature in the 1990s is the tragic attachment/detachment to the land. New writers in the 1990s such as Dong Libo, Xue Mo, Shi Shuqing and Chen Jiming cast their concerning and anxious looks to the vast land in the West, and write their works about the land which is intimate with them in spirit and consciousness"<sup>5</sup>. The concept of tragedy as associated with the land characterizes the West China novels in the 1990s which are different from writers who use to be outcasts to the rural area during the Cultural Revolution. Most of those new writers were born in the countryside in West China, and received higher education in the city. They have direct experience of the grandeur of the new era, while learning from the older generations of rural writers to reflect the essence of the land. Therefore their works are imbued with a kind of newness which sets them apart from writers in the 1980s.

China's reform and opening started along the eastern coastal regions in the late 1970s, gradually spreading to the West interior areas of the country in the 1990s. The once closed and parochial Western inland experienced unprecedented upheavals, and was forced towards significant transition. On the other hand, the traditional country culture had been trying to hold its position to oppose the novel ideas and practices of urbanity and modernity.

While in the eastern areas such conflicts were most often resolved almost overnight, in West China the internal opposition and external demands exerted great pressure either way, making the process a painful one. With the arrival of the market economy, the juxtaposition between the urban and rural areas, the traditional land and country life are fading in the memory. On the other hand, the economic takeoff in East China poses as a challenge to the western interior regions.

With the increasing discrepancies between East and West China, in June 1999, China's Central Government started its initiative to develop the Greater West. The government injected huge amounts of resources, but the situation hasn't seen much improvement. In 1997, the difference of GDP per capita between the east and west was 5057.6 *yuan*, but in 2005 it increased to 13500 *yuan*, and in 2009 21000 *yuan*. 80-90% of the poverty-stricken areas and population in China are in the West.

The government's strategic policies to develop the West include 3 basic measures, namely infrastructural construction, restoration of arable land and forestation, and development of specialised industries. Such measures are positive, but in their implementation they added to the

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<sup>5</sup> Ding Fan, *A History of Modern Literature in West China* (Beijing, People's Literature Press, 2004) 351

burdens and pressures of the farmers. Such situations are more often than not reflected in novels such as *Qin Qiang* by Jia Pingwa and *A Sacrifice to the Desert* by Xue Mo.

The encroachment by the wildness, especially with aftermath of the desertification of the land with the rise of development and industrialisation, the struggles and fights against the cruelty of nature, these used to be the subject of writings in the 1980s. However, in the late 1990s and 2000s, new West China writers have turned their gaze towards the diminishing rural spaces, and the anxiety-ridden confrontation between development and traditionality. The tragic-ness of the land persists, on the land and in the narratives about it. In the 1990s, the subjects or themes of West China literature used to be the conflict between staying and leaving, while in the recent decade they reflect the conundrum between the fading memories and life in exile.

To conclude, the discrepancies between the east and west in China have been the leading subject matter in West China writings, but in essence they reflect a feeling of inability and helplessness of being caught in changes of times. The uniqueness of the Western parts of China is almost an echo of China itself, facing external pressures and internal cries for changes, trying to adapt itself and find its true position in the world that is increasingly flat. A