A wider and stranger space: world literature and world-building in Xue Yiwei's fiction

Pamela Hunt

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Pamela HUNT

"A Wider and Stranger Space": World Literature and World-building in Xue Yiwei's Fiction

Abstract

Through references to Xue Yiwei's (1964–) emigration to Canada, the translation of his works into English, and his repeated discussion of Western authors, the majority of critics have emphasized Xue's global outlook. However, to date, there has been relatively little discussion of the ways in which his engagement with the world has shaped his writing. This article considers how Xue Yiwei attempts to "transcend the boundaries of language" and create what he calls a "wider and stranger space for literature" against the background of a historically fraught relationship between Chinese and World literature. What does this space look like? Where can we locate it in relation to China and in relation to the world? How does Xue attempt to shape this space through his writing? This article considers these questions from three angles: Xue's repeated use of explicit intertextuality, the multilingual and polyphonic nature of his writing, and the way in which his books have circulated beyond China. Despite continuing unevenness in the global literary field, this article argues for points of creative agency in Xue Yiwei's attempt to "dialogue with the world."

Keywords: Xue Yiwei, world literature, world-building, born-translated novels, intertextuality

Introduction

In Xue Yiwei's 2012 short story "Country Girl" (*Cungu*), a Canadian woman on a train to Montreal finds herself sitting next to a Chinese man. Having led a sheltered life, this is, in her words, "the first time the East had come so close that she could reach out and touch it" (Xue 2013a, 191). Both travellers overcome their initial shyness when they realize they have brought the same book on their journey: Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, with her copy in English, his in Chinese. This discovery, and the ensuing conversation, swiftly leads to a profound sense of connection between the two. Their sudden friendship forged across national and cultural borders is, they agree, "[a]ll thanks to Paul Auster!" (Xue 2013a, 197). Just before they disembark from the train, the couple each lift their copy of *The New York Trilogy* and touch the spines together — a ritualistic underscoring of their belief in the uniting power of literature.

This scene captures many of the themes that run through the fiction and non-fiction written by Xue Yiwei, himself a Chinese national who emigrated to

Canada in 2002. Xue's stories are littered with travellers who seek solace in human connection across divides cultural, spatial, or temporal. As in "Country Girl," this connection is largely brought about by the reading and circulation of texts. In repeatedly fusing texts with movement and in the global reach of his literary references, Xue Yiwei's writing appears not only as a means of "dialoguing with the world" (Hu 2021) but also as an exploration of the various dynamics and definitions of world literature. As both people and books cross borders in "Country Girl," and as a shared love of literature is celebrated across different cultures, we see Goethe's vision of exchange across different nations to appreciate the "universal possession of mankind" (Damrosch 2003, 1). We also see a narrative enactment of Damrosch's third definition of world literature as a mode of reading that brings about "a detached engagement with the world beyond our own" (Damrosch 2003, 297). Or, perhaps more accurately, this scene indicates not just an *engagement* with the world but the idea of *sharing* it, creating a cosmopolitan mindset that provides, in Appiah's words, "a way of seeing yourself as belonging in a world of fellows" (Appiah 2016, 202).

And yet, for students of Chinese literature, the scenes in "Country Girl" will also lead us to a set of associated metanarratives that have run through the Chinese literary field since at least the nineteenth century. In its tale of a Chinese reader establishing his intelligence and humanity through an understanding of a novel, we see a faith in the power of literature — and especially Anglophone literature — to establish one's deserved place in the world at large. Equally, world literature, whether we use this term to refer to a canon of works, as a mode of reading, or as an academic field of study, has long been fraught with accusations of Euro- and Anglocentrism. Viewed through this lens, points of friction in the above scene of shared reading emerge. What can we make of the cosmopolitan mindset that appears, given that it seems to rely upon an appreciation of Western culture as a means to achieve it? Are the "country girl" and the Chinese artist truly inhabiting a "world of fellows" on an equal footing? Where does a Chinese reader and, by extension, a Chinese text belong in the world?

Indeed, the point at which China and "the world" meet on a textual level has, over the centuries, been marked by a host of anxieties and a lingering sense of unevenness between Chinese and Western cultural capital, both among members of the Chinese literary field and China scholars. At this moment, however, it is worth considering a second extract from Xue Yiwei's work, this time from a 2012 novel titled *Dr. Bethune's Children* (*Bai Qiu'en de haizimen*). In a preface to a fictionalized memoir, the narrator — who is, like Xue himself, an émigré living in Montreal — addresses a Canadian colleague at his university. He speaks of the "shared inspiration" that he and his colleague hold, despite their different backgrounds. He writes of his hope that he and his colleague's

imaginations will "transcend the boundaries of language" and, he says, "discover a wider and stranger space for literature" (Xue 2017a, xi).[1] Just as in the scene in "Country Girl," Xue and his unnamed narrator are concerned with border-crossing and the way in which literature can facilitate the coming together of disparate languages and cultures. What is key here is that the narrator speaks of finding a *new space* through textual exchange; and, the use of the verb "discover" notwithstanding, the implication is that literary imagination can in fact help shape or build that space. Text, and the interaction it instigates between people, is, in other words, a form of building: "a type of world-making activity that enables us to imagine a world" (Cheah 2008, 31).

In discussing Xue Yiwei's work, scholars often point to his global connections. These connections appear in terms of his own emigration to Canada and in terms of his thematic concerns, indicated by his dedication in his 2016 novel *Hilary, Misoka, I* (*Xilali, Mihe, wo)* to "this globalized age" (Xue, 2016b).[2] They also appear in terms of his literary interests and inspirations. He frequently refers to James Joyce, Calvino, and Borges as his heroes, and he has published several essays and essay collections on Western works of literature (Xue 2015; Xu 2018; McGillis 2016; Wasserstrom 2020). Critics have repeatedly highlighted the influence of non-Chinese authors on his writing style (Wasserstrom 2022; Walsh 2022; Lin 2021a; Lin 2021b; Rampolla 2023). He is, as Hu Ying puts it, "an extraordinarily widely read author" (Hu 2021, 35). Xue has summed up his own attitude towards his place in the world by declaring that world literature is his "homeland" — one that "does not concern itself with the boundary of national borders" (Hu 2021, 35). To date, however, there has been little discussion of the way in which the world shapes his works and, in particular, the way in which his works imagine, or shape, a world.

Against this background, and with the starting point of Xue's hope for "a wider and stranger space," this article explores how Xue attempts to build this space through his recurring trope of the border-crossing text. How do Xue's hopes for a "wider and stranger space" shape his own writing? What is the topography of this space, what shape do the contours take, and where are the boundaries? What points of friction appear in its shaping? And where, if anywhere, does the Chinese nation exist within this world-building project? Rather than considering Xue's works from the perspective of a Chinese writer "marching out into the world" (*zouxiang shijie*) and joining up with a pre-existing (Western) literary space, this article considers how Xue Yiwei's writing attempts

[1] This quotation and all others from *Dr. Bethune's Children* are taken from Darryl Sterk's 2017 English translation.
[2] Published in English as *Celia, Misoka, I* in 2022.

to spring from, and therefore builds up, a different kind of world, even as he maintains a deliberate connection to European and Anglophone literature.

I will start with a brief overview of the ways in which ideas about Chinese literature and the world have developed both in terms of what I will refer to as the Chinese literary field — Chinese authors, critics, and thinkers — and in terms of what I will refer to as China scholars — academics either within or outside of China who study Chinese literature. This section provides context for Xue's own impulse to "dialogue with the world" and will consider in more detail what I have already touched upon here: that rather than considering whether Xue's writing successfully joins up with a pre-existing "world" or the West, it is more fruitful to consider the ways in which the world shapes, and is shaped by, his works.

The second section will consider the way in which travelling people, ideas, and texts are used in Xue's fiction in order to build up a "wider and stranger space" in a time of globalization and constant motion. I will argue that he engages with, and creates narratives of, the idea of world literature as a mode of reading and a form of circulation. This "book traveling" (Moraru 2009) prompts readers to move, either physically or in terms of their imagination; but more than this, travelling texts change the very fabric of time and space, rendering it elastic, creating a new space (or world) alongside the one in which the texts circulate. But the question remains: what does it mean that the texts that move and prompt movement continue to be part of the Western-approved canon?

While the second section of this article will consider mostly the way in which *reading* world literature creates new (and replicates old) worlds, the third will shift towards world literature as a mode of *writing*. By drawing on Rebecca Walkowitz's ideas of the born-translated and the world-shaped novel, I consider the ways that Xue's novels, especially his later works, are from the very start conceived as the product (and celebration) of circulation, border-crossing, and multilingualism. I will ask what this means for Xue's "world" literature and explore the spaces where the nation, especially China, remains, arguing that it lingers in tenacious ideas about the meaning of literature and in the after-effects of historical events.

The final section will turn briefly back to the idea of world literature and circulation to ask how Xue's texts move into a global space. In exploring issues of translation, the marketing of translated texts, and the paratext of his works, I seek to answer the same questions from a different angle: What are the contours of the "wider and stranger space" that Xue envisages? Does it overwrite or align itself with the existing structures within the global literary field?

Literature, China, the World

Xue Yiwei's impulse to create a space that might cross national borders or even overwrite national territories must surely be considered within the broader context of modern China's literary relationship with "the world."[3] The question of where in the world Chinese literature might fit has been a longstanding and well-documented source of consternation, both for members of the Chinese literary field and scholars of the same. As we know, since the beginning of the modern literary period, the stakes have been extremely high, used as a means of "explaining and justifying China's membership in the modern international community" (Liu 1995, 188). Moreover, as many scholars have observed, the idea that China must participate on a "global" stage has, in reality, more or less referred to acceptance by Western literary fields and markets (Lovell 2006, 107).

The discourse surrounding China's literary relationship with the world has been from the outset distinctly paradoxical: Chinese literature must move towards "the world" in order to establish a strong *national* identity and status. Modes and forms inspired by Western literature were held up as the answer to Chinese ills, and an admiration for, and emulation of, foreign cultural production was coupled with an anxiety about the same (Tsu 2010; Lovell 2006, 73–76). These concerns, and in particular the practice of placing Western literature as the standard to meet, are captured by Chen Duxiu's rhetorical question in his famous 1917 article "On Literary Revolution":

> The present literature has prevented us from opening our eyes to the world, to society, to literary trends, and to the Zeitgeist. . . . Among the outstanding literary figures of this nation, are there those who dare consider themselves China's Hugo, Zola, Goethe, Hauptmann, Dickens, or Wilde?" (Chen 1996, 145)

As opening up and reform gathered pace in the late 1980s, the slogan exhorting China to "march towards the world," when applied to the literary sphere, implied a similar paradoxical yearning, as did the notion that China might "link up" with the world (*yu shijie jiegui*) (Lovell 2006, 107, 113; Xie 2008, 18). An internationalist focus does not ultimately mean "opening up" to the world (the West) but going out to meet the West on the West's own terms.[4] China's desire

[3] For more detailed analysis of the relationship between the Chinese literary field and the West, see Liu (1995) and Tsu (2010).

[4] Theodore Huters points to a longer slogan: "*Zhongguo zouxiang shijie, shijie zouxiang Zhongguo*" ("China marches out to the world, the world marches out to China") (2005, 5–6). However, it is the first half of this couplet that became widespread , with the latter rarely employed at all. See Lovell (2006, 113–118) for a discussion of these slogans in relation to 1980s and 1990s Chinese literature.

for a Nobel Prize in Literature, a search meticulously traced by Julia Lovell (2006), is a clear example of the continuing conceptual difficulties that the Chinese literary field has grappled with: proving China's cultural worth as a nation seemingly relied upon gaining acknowledgement from an international community which has historically acted as an imperialist aggressor and continues to overlook China's own cultural force.

From a theoretical point of view, the question of the location of Chinese literature within broader comparative and world literature frameworks will be a familiar one to China scholars. Countless studies have pointed out how uneven geopolitical dynamics are replicated within literary studies (Jones 1994; Zhang 2015; Bachner 2016). Putting aside for now the particularly thorny question of what constitutes "China" within "Chinese literature" (Shih 2013, Wang 2013), it is clear that multiple paradigms of a world literature, whether we follow Goethe's network that connects humanity, Casanova's "republic of letters" (2004) or Damrosch's "mode of reading" (Damrosch 2003, 5), often create the same Euro- or Anglocentric topography (Jones 1994; Zhang 2015, 6; Bachner 2016). As Yingjin Zhang (2015) puts it:

> Because the West holds inevitably the exclusive right to setting the aesthetic and experiential terms of such reading, its correlated production, as well as the distribution of knowledge and values, China cannot but be "othered" to world literature.

When Chinese literature is read and studied within this context, it is either forced into a "cultural ghetto" (Jones 1994, 171) or risks losing its particularities, becoming universalized and flattened (Tsu 2010). As with the discourse of "marching towards the world" and "joining up with the world," if Chinese literature is viewed as engaging in a perpetual bid to meet the aesthetic and experiential terms of the West, it is inevitably at risk of being cast as a "minor" or "peripheral" literature (Moretti 2000; Casanova 2004), or perhaps a "belated" literature, playing an everlasting game of catch-up (Jones 1994, 184).

At the same time, Chinese literature that embraces or even simply acknowledges interactions with the West is at risk of being dismissed as pandering to Western tastes and markets, as Stephen Owen charged in the now somewhat infamous article on Bei Dao and world poetry. Owen identifies — and bemoans — a formula for world or international poetry as that which contains dashes of "local color" (1990, 28) combined with the main component of "universal images." These images, Owen suggests, "give the international reader an altogether safe and quick experience of another culture" (28). Describing much of modern(ist) Chinese poetry as "thin and wanting," not to mention

saccharine and "embarrassing" (30), Owen lands on the unequal nature of cultural exchange and Western-dominated literary markets as the cause:

> As in any cross-cultural exchange that goes in only one direction, the culture that receives influence will always find itself in the secondary position. (30)

Owen's negative evaluation of literature that shows this kind of engagement with the West has been vociferously critiqued by many scholars, including Rey Chow and Michelle Yeh (Chow 1993), and does not need much further discussion here. However, Owen's complaints are worth mentioning in the context of this article for two reasons. Firstly, his point that contemporary Chinese literature is structured and in some sense determined by Western-dominated literary markets is — as Andrew Jones (1994) points out — inarguable. Secondly, however, Owen's argument is also worth highlighting for his automatic suspicion of any text that has ingested Western literature or has ambitions beyond a national readership. It is Owen's reference to "cross-cultural exchange that goes only in one direction" that is most telling here: as much as Owen regrets this (supposed) state of affairs,[5] it is a state of affairs created in part by critics and scholars such as Owen, who in emphasizing Western literary dominance over Chinese literature then follow the same discursive route, seeing only a pattern of Western influence/Chinese imitation and eliding moments of agency and creativity on the part of Chinese authors.

While questions of influence remain a cause for concern for some China scholars, when it comes to theoretical definitions of world literature and its mapping, the emphasis has focused overwhelmingly on transmission (Weightman 2020). World literature, according to Damrosch, is that which "gains in translation" (Damrosch 2006, 288) and circulates "beyond its point of origin" (6). Scholars have pointed out the flaws with this definition: it continues to draw focus on translation into English, rather than any other language, and it risks overlooking literary and other cultural transmissions beyond the usual European/American centres. With regards to Chinese-language literature, then, the way in which texts move between the PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and other countries is missed, thus overlooking a number of ways in which texts "gain" and move in spaces outside of the West (Bachner 2016, 870). Moreover, such an approach, again, ignores the creativity and agency that appears when writers draw on "foreign" influences to create texts that will then circulate

[5] Owen's claim that the exchange is unidirectional is certainly open to debate. For analyses of the multidirectional nature of cultural exchanges between the West and China, see Liu (1995), Chen (1995), and Shih (2001).

largely within their domestic field. As such, Bachner makes the compelling suggestion that world literature might instead be assessed in terms of its input:

> And what about the profound shaping and reshaping of modern Chinese culture by way of foreign influences? Would not the unprecedented creative translation, absorption, and reshaping of non-Chinese cultures make Chinese literature a world literature? (Bachner 2016, 870)

A text that engages with texts beyond its own point of origin can surely be considered part of, and contributive to, "the world." In this way, we can think about China's place within world literature not as one belated element attaching to a pre-existing model but as a constituent feature of that world literary system.

The aim, then, is to move away from the tendency to view China as a literature that must catch up with and match up to a pre-determined target. One way of doing this is to conceive of contemporary world literature less as a pre-existing system within which texts may or may not fit but as a constructive force. That is, to think of world literature as world-making literature. This idea is one that has gained traction in more recent explorations of literature, cosmopolitanism, and world literature (Cheah 2008; Cheah 2016; Tsu 2010; Wang 2017). Pointing to Goethe's emphasis on intercourse, exchange, and interaction, Pheng Cheah argues that we must see world literature not as a collection of "aesthetic objects" (Cheah 2008, 31) but instead as a "fundamental force in the ongoing cartography and creation of the world" (31). Literature is "a type of world-making activity that enables us to imagine a world," in part through its "powers of figuration" but also, Cheah argues, because "it arouses in us pleasure and a desire to share this pleasure through universal communication" (28). Thus, returning to "Country Girl," the moment when the Chinese man and the Canadian woman touch their book spines together is not simply a celebration of the uniting powers of literature or a moment of languages and cultures meeting. It is, rather, the active construction of a different space, one in which borders between nations, languages, and cultures are permeable. Simultaneously, as he brings the novels of Paul Auster into the realm of his own writing, Xue does the same on an extratextual level.

Because new worlds necessarily appear from and reshape old ones, then, as Clark, Finlay, and Kelly (2017) point out, "worldmaking is always at least transformative, but also potentially powerful or subversive" (2–3). World-making is also inherently pluralistic, in that in imagining other worlds, we must also "keep ourselves perpetually open to what lies outside the parameters of our particular world views" (4). The idea of world-making through world literature therefore paves the way for a far more active participation in the global literary

field for authors in so-called “marginal” cultures such as China, highlighting the potential agency that appears when one engages with the world, and especially when one imagines alternative spaces.

Rather than seeking to “march towards” a pre-existing world whose shape has been fixed by Eurocentric tastes and concepts of literature determined by a Western-oriented global market, Chinese writers can participate in the literary field in a more meaningful way through the recreation of their own alternative “worlds.” Rather than retracing old anxieties of China’s literary power or hurrying to indicate an elusive cultural modernity, authors might imagine new, pluralistic spaces in which they, and their texts, can hold equal footing with those from other nations and cultures. World literature, in this sense and in Cheah’s words, is therefore less about establishing one’s parity with other nations and cultures and more “an active power in the making of worlds, that is, both a site of processes of worlding and an agent that participates and intervenes in these processes” (Cheah 2016, 2).

Reading World Literature

I return, again, to the moment that the Canadian “country girl” realizes that the Chinese man sitting next to her is reading the same Paul Auster book:

> This was what she had imagined and waited for for so many years: in an unfamiliar place, an unfamiliar person would notice what she was reading. (Xue 2013a, 191)

Xue’s short stories, novels, and essays are rife with such encounters: moments in which a text brings together two strangers from disparate cultures, experiences, and countries. His texts are, therefore, peppered with references to other authors. Reading Xue’s works, one encounters references to Plato, Shakespeare, Hegel, Charlotte Brontë, Samuel Beckett, Paul Auster, Ralph Ellison, Gertrude Stein, J.K. Rowling, and so on. More than a display of Xue’s clear intellectual and cosmopolitan credentials, these texts are vital drivers of Xue’s plots.[6] In his 2020 novel, *Li’er Wang yu 1979* (King Lear and 1979), a young peasant’s life is changed forever when he reads a copy of the play; in *Hilary, Misoka and I* (2016a), the unnamed Chinese narrator — who is, again, living in Montreal — establishes a profound but mysterious relationship with a Canadian woman through a love of literature: “It was Shakespeare that brought us close together” (Xue 2016a, 107).

[6] For an analysis of the ways in which implicit intertextuality informs Xue Yiwei’s recent writing, see Lin (2021b) and Rampolla (2023).

What is key here is not only the bridges built through textual exchange; it is the trope of movement.[7] It is worth noting that with the exception of his stories set in the pre-reform past, all of Xue's works are set against the backdrop of a world that is characterized by near-ceaseless physical, technological, financial, and cultural mobility. They teem with networks and connections, often made from afar. Characters in almost every tale move abroad — to Canada, Hong Kong, New Zealand, or the UK — and the narratives of several of his stories either play out on a train or a taxi or are told through long-distance phone calls, airmail, or email. The explicit intertextuality[8] that characterizes Xue's works is a constant reminder to us that texts also travel.[9] In "Country Girl," the texts that move do so in a very literal, material sense, when the two travellers press their books' spines against each other so that the physical copies of books "meet" — or indeed "bump into" — each other on the train. The travelling texts then inspire *more* travel. Following her conversation with the Chinese man, the Canadian woman decides, almost on a whim, to move to Shenzhen. She makes clear the direct link between a text and her journey: "It was the American author Paul Auster . . . that had brought her to China" (Xue 2013a, 207–208). This divergence from her original path is in fact the result of a number of overlapping and somewhat unexpected journeys made by bodies and texts: *The New York Trilogy* travels from America to China; a Chinese man carries it to Canada; on a train travelling from Toronto to Montreal it is reunited with its English-language original; the ensuring conversation prompts the Canadian woman to move to China. These physical and cultural journeys overwrite the traditional trope of a solitary, unidirectional path of East to West and alert us instead to random, crisscrossing movements that appear in a globalized world — and a globalized world literature.

Xue is certainly not the only Chinese-born writer who repeatedly employs explicit references to foreign literary works in his own stories; one could in fact argue that this is a common trope in contemporary Chinese literature, appearing in a broad range of texts. We might think, for example, of how in 1977 the first work of Scar literature, Liu Xinwu's "Class Counsellor" (*Banzhuren*), expounded the value of reading works such as Voynich's *The Gadfly* in order to counter the

[7] For another discussion of transnational and transcultural movement in a number of Xue's "Shenzhener" stories, see Rampolla (2023).

[8] In using this term, I am drawing on Thornber's definition: "Explicit intertextuality most often involves identical or nearly identical titles (intertitularity, title intertextuality), characters with the same names or strikingly similar personalities (interfigurality, figures on loan), direct citations whether marked or unmarked (quotational allusions), and overt references to earlier texts (onomastic allusions)" (2009, 220).

[9] For a discussion of the overlapping discourses that exist between migration studies and world literature studies, see Friedman (2018).

spiritual damage wrought by the Gang of Four's repressive cultural policies.[10] Just over two decades later, Wei Hui's *Shanghai Baby* (*Shanghai baobei*) (1999) was littered with references that ranged from Dumas to Miller to Ginsberg (Knight 2006, 244–258). Meanwhile, Dai Sijie repeatedly centres his narratives around the effects of non-Chinese literature on Chinese readers, as in *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (*Balzac et la petite tailleuse chinoise*) (2020), when the story of *Ursule Mirouët* transforms the lives of rural peasants. Again and again, contemporary authors return to narratives that hinge upon what Christian Moraru (2009) refers to as "other reading": reading texts that are not from their own country or culture. More than this, as in the case of Xue Yiwei's work, authors repeatedly use what Lena Henningsen (2022) calls "reading acts" when a fictional reader reads a book (often a non-Chinese one) that exists in the real world. These reading acts are used as a crucial form of characterization and to create pivotal moments in the plot; they have the effect of showing a deliberate movement away from repressive Mao-era cultural policies or serving as indications of a character's modern, cosmopolitan outlook. At the same time, Henningsen points out that something more complex — and perhaps more interesting — than cultural signalling is also occurring during such reading acts:

> The fictional reading act serves as an interface by which the real world reader can move from one page to another, just as she would move by way of a hyperlink from one internet page to another. (553)

This highlights for us, again, the idea of movement. If Xue Yiwei reminds us repeatedly that texts travel, then Henningsen's idea of intertextual "interfaces" also demonstrates that *people* can travel via texts, moving in an expansive way that overcomes the usual physical borders.[11] Through this movement, space and time are reimagined. Moraru argues that in the case of Dai Sijie's *Balzac*, reading non-Chinese texts allows characters to understand "the ways of the self" (2009, 127), and this act is therefore not just "informative" but also "formative" (121). But more than merely self-forming, the act of reading and sharing non-Chinese literature that occurs in Xue's work is also quite clearly space- or even *world*-forming.

There are several examples in Xue's fiction of when reading a transcultural literary text alters space and time. In "The Physics Teacher" (*Wuli laoshi*), for example, a student and his teacher make "time stand still, or cease to have

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[10] For a detailed discussion of the link between *The Gadfly* and Chinese literature, see Henningsen (2020).

[11] Or, in Megan Walsh's phrase, reading (and writing) allows for a "private act of emigration" (Walsh 2022).

meaning" by staying up all night to talk about various Western thinkers and critics (2013c, 32). In "The Playwright" (*Juzuojia*), two men strike up a conversation after one sees the other reading Shakespeare's *Complete Works* in English. This book, as one of the men puts it, becomes "the bridge between him and me" (2013b, 71). Of course, what this explicit intertextuality also creates is a bridge (or hyperlink, as Henningsen might put it) between Xue and his international counterparts, as well as Xue and international readers. He is creating a collectively imagined literary space, an expansive and dynamic network of texts and thinkers. Clark, Finlay, and Kelly (2017), citing Nelson Goodman, point out that "Worldmaking . . . necessarily 'starts from worlds already at hand. Their making is remaking'" (2). Following on from this,

> Each new book, each new commentary, each new piece of criticism is engaged in the process of worldmaking through the simultaneous appropriation and extension of existing discourses. (3)

Intertextuality such as Xue's might thus be seen as a form of world-building in which existing texts and discourses are appropriated, extended, and used in order to imagine a world. The space that appears here calls to mind Wai Chee Dimock's exploration of "literature for the planet":

> Mandelstam's love of Dante – the physical presence of the poetry inside his pocket – suggests that there is much to be said for literature as a continuum. This continuum extends across space and time, messing up territorial sovereignty and numerical chronology. Authors centuries and thousands of miles apart can turn out to be inseparable. . . . Space and time, in short, have no absolute jurisdiction when it comes to the bond between texts and readers. (Dimock 2001, 174–175)

However, even as Xue points to the globally expansive, elastic spacetime and a community of readers that crosses borders of all kinds, Xue's explicit intertextuality also holds clear links to reading practices that draw on specific local historical contingencies; local space and time still have significant roles to play. The practice of reading, sharing, and circulating books has a particular resonance in post-Mao society which was marked by the "High Culture Fever" (Wang 1996) and the flood of translated books into the nation.[12] As Shouhua Qi describes it, there was in the late 1970s and early 1980s a "feverish renaissance

[12] Xue himself has pointed to 1978 and 1979 as turning points for Chinese society and his own literary ambitions for this reason (Xue 2018a, 1; McGillis 2016).

of learning, [a] burning hunger for knowledge, . . . [a] thrill in reading, sharing (literally, passing the book around), discussing, and, yes, debating" (Qi 2012, 137).

In other words, Xue's repeated trope of a text that travels from afar, and changes the lives of Chinese readers, echoes the historical, local experience as much as it creates connections with a broader, global literary network. Xue Yiwei talks of the profound significance that a border-crossing book held for him in an interview with Jeffrey Wasserstrom (2020):

> One afternoon around 1972 or so, while passing my school holidays in the village where my grandparents were living, I was shocked to see a little English book in a drawer where my grandfather kept his personal things. It was a copy of *King Lear*. The moment was not only the beginning of my latest novel, but also the origin of my entire literary career.

This was, of course, at the height of the Cultural Revolution when such a work would have been officially banned; it is the *local* context that makes a global text both shocking and life-changing.

Xue's memory is also interesting in the fact that it revolves around a book-as-object. Its materiality is what makes it possible for this book to be both hidden and then stumbled upon. Its materiality is the basis for its ability to inspire human connection and inspiration, just as seeing a physical book is transformative in "Country Girl" and "The Playwright." Repeat recourse to the materiality of books takes on an extra layer of significance when we consider the history of book sharing during the Cultural Revolution and the years following. While the 1960s and 1970s have typically been portrayed as an era of literary deprivation, studies have more recently pointed out the "cosmopolitanism" of the period (Volland 2020) and the limits to the literary control that the CCP attempted to exert (Henningsen 2017, 118). The production and circulation of hand-copied books (*shouchaoben*) are an example of the ways in which this period contained far more cultural richness than one might have assumed, but they also provided a way of establishing new, illicit forms of social connection. As Shuyu Kong points out, the fact that these works were hand-written and then passed from person to person meant that they created multiple forms of "affective interaction":

> not only between books and readers, but among the people exchanging the books, in the sense that together they formed a linking chain of social communication." (2020, 246)

These circulating books, whose movements derived from the rampant, internal mobility of the sent-down youth, drew alternative, unorthodox maps between readers. Xue Yiwei's readers, drawn together by a shared love of global texts, shaping a "wider and stranger space" in the process, recall this cartographic act.

Questions, however, remain. As will be apparent by now, the vast majority of the explicit references to other texts in Xue's work are to Anglophone texts from the Global North, reflecting the ongoing cultural dominance of Anglophone literature. How new, then, is the space that Xue Yiwei shapes through intertextual reference? Karen Thornber sums up the difficulties of intertextual practices that occur across a cultural playing field made uneven by colonial or semicolonial histories:

> On the one hand, intertextualizing can signal refusal to succumb to the rhetoric of the (former) imperial power. On the other hand, massaging metropolitan creative works into bodies of colonial and postcolonial texts can legitimize metropolitan cultural capital and authority. (2009, 213)

Equally, Xue's repeated references to English and American literature and philosophy might be interpreted as a means of either asserting his place in the world literary scene, in defiance of China's historic unrecognized status, or perhaps as complying with the existing world literary order. To gain a sense of how Xue's dialogue with the world can create a new space, it is instructive to consider not just how the world is read by Xue Yiwei and by his characters but also how it is written into his texts.

Writing World Literature

Xue Yiwei's interest in the circulation of texts appears not only in the theme and content of his writing; it has also informed the way in which he writes, shaping the form of his works and providing the impetus behind their creation. A useful framework for considering much of Xue's work is Rebecca Walkowitz's concept of "born-translated" texts and the "world-shaped novel." Walkowitz's influential 2015 study set out to consider literature that "approaches translation as medium and origin rather than as an afterthought" (3), arguing persuasively that for some novels, translation is the "condition of their production" rather than part of their afterlife, or, as she vividly puts it, "the engine rather than the caboose of literary history" (4, 5). While her study focuses entirely on contemporary authors writing in English, the literary conditions that she describes as a "literary system attuned to multiple formats, media, and languages" (4) is one that other writers in other languages, including Xue Yiwei, must also participate in. Indeed,

several of the identifying features of the born-translated novels that Walkowitz points to are also evident in Xue Yiwei's writing. Born-translated novels are those for which "translation functions as a thematic, structural, conceptual and sometimes even typographical device" (4). They are novels that connect to translation in a number of ways: they are written in the hope of being translated — or *for* translation; they are written as though they already are translated — or *as* translations; and they are written *from* translations (4, 5).

The idea that translation can take a central role in the production of literature has significant implications for our approach to world literature, the shaping of a new global space, and especially our exploration of the relationship between nation and world in Chinese fiction. If, as Walkowitz argues, we accept that a literary work can begin "in several languages and several places," then it alters our understanding of the location of literature, questioning, in particular, the idea that a work can "belong" to a certain nation (30). Born-translated novels, by using multiple languages, multiple narratives, and multiple sites and scales of geography, dissuade us from our usual practice of linking a text to a sole place or identity.

Connected to the idea of the polyphonic or multilingual, of particular pertinence to this article is Walkowitz's idea of the "world-shaped novel." This term refers to a text that "attributes its aesthetic and spatial origins to planetary circulation rather than to national, regional, or urban geographies associated with one language" (2015, 47). Novels such as these, which move across several geographic regions and accommodate several narrative points of view, explore the way in which the movement of "people, objects, ideas, and even aesthetic styles" can reshape our understanding of national, regional, or cultural identity or imagined communities (123).

When it comes to Chinese literature's place on the global literary stage, the insistence that, as Walkowitz puts it, a novel can belong "to more than one language" (14) suggests again that we might reconsider the longstanding desire of Chinese writers and intellectuals to "march towards the world" or "link China up with the world." As we have seen, discourses such as these can imply that Chinese literature is both marginal and belated, desperately in need of reaching the standards set by the rest of the world (or the West). A novel that is born translated, on the other hand, does not need to set the world as a target because it is already inherently in, and of, the world. Moreover, considering a work as having from its outset multiple languages and locations means we steer away from considering global literary flows in terms of clear binaries such as East/West, major/minor, or dominant/subaltern literatures, allowing us instead to find the moments within a Chinese text that embrace the flexible, the multilateral, and the polyphonic — the "wider and stranger" space, perhaps.

In “Country Girl,” the Canadian woman and the Chinese man compare their two copies of *The New York Trilogy*.

> “Look, this is the same book that you are reading,” he said earnestly.
>
> This surprised her because she couldn’t understand a single word on the cover. She flipped through the pages and couldn’t understand anything there either. She turned to the same page as the one she had been reading in her own book and placed the copies next to each other. “Are these really the same book?” she asked [. . .]
>
> “This is something I think about all the time,” the East Asian man said. “Can a translation and its original really be seen as the same book? Can we ever trust a translation?” (Xue 2013a, 191–192)

With the volumes placed side by side, two languages, or two cultures, are moved into sudden proximity, and again the trope of elastic space emerges as the distance between China and the West disappears. At the same time, the sense of a possible gap remains. The question of the fidelity of a translation, its authenticity, and its relationship to an original text goes unanswered in the story. But translation is a common theme in Xue’s narratives, pushing into his texts in such a way that it also affects their form. In his latest novel, *King Lear and 1979*, for example, Shakespeare’s drama plays a formative role in the protagonist’s own life, and lines from the play are quoted repeatedly. They are embedded into Xue’s text in the original English, a highly visible indication of the theme of a travelling text and of Xue’s cosmopolitan intertextuality. Crucially, the narrator always hastens to translate the line for the reader, always with the phrase “this is roughly equal to” (*da yi shi*) — a repeated reminder of the imperfect, ongoing process of translation that is occurring (Hu 2021, 36).

To take another example, in *Hilary, Misoka, I*, the narrative has nestled within it the narratives of many characters — tales within tales — related to the narrator via different countries, eras, and languages. The narrator highlights the overlap between translation and creation and the polyphonic nature of the novel when he introduces a story that one of the characters, Misoka, has written. It is a piece of auto-fiction by a woman of Japanese heritage, written in French but which is then related to us in Chinese:

> What appears below is . . . not, of course, a word-for-word translation, perhaps not even a free translation, but a sketch made out of scraps of truth

left to me by Misoka. Strictly speaking, this is a kind of collaborative creation. Xue 2016a,225)

Here, perhaps, we have the answer to the question that the Canadian woman and the Chinese man ponder in "Country Girl." Rather than thinking of producing an exact rendition after the fact, the creativity of translation is emphasized, and this creativity opens up a space of multiplicity and polyphony. Translation might be commonly seen as a way of shrinking spaces — making the inaccessible and distant within reach, the incomprehensible comprehensible — but the effect is different here. Constant translation, accompanied by a constant reminder of their incomplete nature, reminds us of the distance that remains despite one's best efforts. Repeatedly embarking upon translation whilst highlighting the source's fundamental untranslatability proves an effective way of shaping a space that is "wider" — a broad spectrum of readers are brought together — and "stranger" — nothing (or no word) is precisely as it seems.

Xue's 2012 novel *Dr. Bethune's Children* is an especially clear example of how a born-translated, world-shaped novel can prompt us to rethink the ways in which Chinese and world literature interact. It is narrated by an unnamed Chinese historian who emigrated to Montreal in the early 1990s. The narrator was initially drawn to the city because of its connection to his idol, Dr Norman Bethune, the Canadian surgeon who provided medical care to the Communist Army in 1938. After his death in 1939 and Mao Zedong's famous eulogy[13] in the same year, Bethune became a hero of the Chinese people. As he attempts to write a biography of Bethune, the narrator writes instead a series of personal letters addressed to him, probing the bond that he feels with the surgeon, and detailing his own life in contemporary Montreal as well as his childhood and young adulthood in China during the Cultural Revolution; opening up and reform; the Tiananmen Square massacre, which leads to the death of his wife and unborn child; and his emigration to Canada.

Set as it is in bilingual Montreal, described by the narrator as a "city of migrants" (Xue 2017a, 7), peopled with characters from around the globe, dotted with musings on the transnational journeys of both communism and capitalism, and with a multi-strand narrative that shuttles back and forth in time, *Dr. Bethune's Children* is another example of Xue's tendency to write fiction that is set against, and premised on, the expansive mobility of people and ideas. This mobility is multidirectional and ceaseless, with one journey setting off another, as travellers' lives intertwine across eras and across countries in unexpected ways, and time and space are once again made flexible:

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[13] "In Memory of Norman Bethune" (*Jinian Bai Qiu'en*), 1939.

> Dear Dr. Bethune . . . On a quiet North American night, I am gazing at your spirit. It's so far away, yet so near. There it was on that evening, here it is tonight. It confuses me and fills me with awe. (71)

The effect is to establish a kind of "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) that does not adhere to any temporal or national borders but instead traces various global routes, coalescing over points of connection on a sprawling, ever-expanding network.

Just as the characters' sense of belonging cannot be pinned down to one nation or place, we readers are also prompted to consider *Dr. Bethune's Children* not in terms of national literature but as the product of multiple subjectivities and global, rather than national or regional, histories. One way in which this is highlighted is through the recurring theme of multilingualism and translation. There are several ways in which *Dr. Bethune's Children* can be seen as a multilingual text. It is set across two continents, and the action takes place in Chinese, English, and French. While most of this is related to us in one language (the details of which I will discuss in more detail below), "foreign" words are still interspersed throughout the text. These appear either in passing — most obviously in the Francophone names of places in Quebec — or are mentioned and explained by the narrator, which is particularly the case with Chinese terminologies (Xue 2017a, 129, 143, 151, 186). Stories that revolve around regional accents, puns, and mispronunciations (57, 121, 231–235) are another reminder of the polyphony that exists within Canada and China.

Finally, the fact that the narrator begins each chapter with a letter to Bethune means that the story requires another form of translation from the outset, as he struggles to describe life sixty years after Bethune's death:

> Dear Dr. Bethune,
>
> I have just returned from the hospital. On my way home, I swung into the supermarket at the corner of Côte-des-Neiges and Queen Mary.
>
> You're probably wondering what a supermarket is. There will be many unfamiliar words that may be obstacles in the way of your understanding my story. . . . To make it easier for you, I will make a list of all the new words, a custom dictionary you can consult if you get stuck. (6)

With these opening lines to the story proper, we are presented with both an assumption of familiarity and of strangeness. The address mentioned, its

Francophone and Anglophone names placed within touching distance, provides the reader with an immediate image of Quebec's multilingual practices. As a reference to a famously culturally diverse region of the city, Xue also points to the multicultural themes that will run through the book. Yet rather than assume that the street names will be unfamiliar to Bethune, the narrator fears that the seemingly prosaic word "supermarket" will cause difficulties. The promised "list of all the new words" never materializes within the novel, but in highlighting its apparent necessity, the narrator reminds us of the inherent multilingual nature of his endeavour, as well as its inescapably expansive nature: writing and reading one text requires the writing and reading of another. It also inevitably leads to an expanding worldview. It is notable that from the start of his letter-writing project, the narrator connects his writing to the creation of a lexicon, as it calls to mind the point that Bachner makes about dictionaries: they are "an attempt to give a more or less extensive and complete account of a world through mapping a linguistic universe" and are, along with the atlas and the encyclopedia, "paragons of world ordering, even of world making" (2010, 319). This ordering and making, however, must be done across temporal as much as spatial and cultural borders.

As well as semantic issues, the narrator finds himself having to translate conceptual changes, such as China's ideological shifts, which the narrator explains once more through a linguistic lens:

> You were used to people calling each other "comrades" in China. But today, the more popular way of addressing someone is "boss." (Xue 2017a, 27)

Even though he largely writes in one language, the narrator repeatedly engages in the act of translation, which, rather than resulting in a monolingual text, 2serves to emphasize its inherent and undeniable multilingualism.

The idea of a work that is born-translated, with multilingualism, polyphony and transcultural communication informing its form as much as its narrative, takes on another level of significance when we consider the broader linguistic and textual conditions within which *Dr. Bethune's Children* was written and published. In order to do this, I turn to the acknowledgements that appear at the end of the 2017 English-language publication (285–288). In this section, Xue draws attention to the somewhat convoluted beginning of his work, which originated as a series of English-language creative writing assignments in Canada before the poet Bei Dao commissioned Xue to write a Chinese-language long essay on the topic, at which point Xue began to conceive of the narrative as a potential novel to be written in Chinese (Xue 2017a, 286). It is striking that in the four-page note, Xue repeatedly refers to the novel's "journey" (286, 287,

288), highlighting again the trope of textual mobility. In this section, Xue describes the novel as having an origin story "spanning three countries and three different languages" (285), thus explicitly pointing out its cross-cultural, born-translated contours, the product of global circulations rather than a work that belongs to a single nation.

The acknowledgements section of any piece of writing functions as a means of signalling an individual's self-positioning.[14] These notes are no exception and can give us more clues into the shape of the "wider and stranger space" that Xue seeks to build or imagine into being. He thanks a number of people who have helped him realize the project that became *Dr. Bethune's Children*, including Gail Scott, Margaret Atwood, Bei Dao, Ken Liu, Madeleine Thien and Ha Jin (285–288). Many of these names are associated with transcultural writing. A cynic might also note that these names are either from North America or have, perhaps with the exception of Bei Dao, built their literary reputation there. In this sense, just as the texts that spur on his narratives are from the West or Global North, Xue is not so much imagining a new space that overwrites dominant Anglocentric structures as he is aligning himself within this existing space.

However, although an acknowledgements section can be read as an indication of an individual's cultural capital, it also clearly demonstrates another feature of the novel: that it is the product of not one author but instead a range of actors who are, moreover, situated across the world. This includes not only the above-mentioned writers but publishers in Taiwan (Guo Feng); translators in France (Sylvie Gentil and Lucie Rault); and his publisher, translator, and editor in Canada and America (Linda Leith, Darryl Sterk, and Tim Niedermann). Even the readers are acknowledged as playing a role in the book's continuing journey, as they will, as Xue puts it, "give this novel an extraordinary new life" (288). The effect of this is that we are shown, again, the multiplicity of worlds, narratives, and voices that make up the novel. Circulation and translation are again placed at the forefront of the novel, reminding the readers that both processes are not only critical threads of the narrative they have just read but helped produce the material book they now hold in their hands. By extension, we are also reminded that works such as these have an afterlife, too (Walkowitz 2006; 2015, 162). This afterlife is even less dependent on an individual author and allows for an even more expansive, multidirectional movement, taking that work still further away from the idea that its origin is located in a singular geographic spot.

[14] See Weightman (2020) for an illuminating discussion on how authorial prefaces can reveal how Chinese authors negotiate their places within a global literary readership and marketplace.

This is not at all to argue that *Dr. Bethune's Children* is a novel that is entirely disconnected from China. A striking feature of Xue Yiwei's acknowledgements is that some names cannot be said:

> the numerous editors, publishers and scholars in mainland China for their courageous and resolute efforts, so far unsuccessful, to bring this novel to readers there. (Xue 2017a, 287)

For what Xue refers to as "the same reason" (286), which refers to the reference to sensitive topics, including the Tiananmen Square massacre, this work cannot be published in China. This political fact has played a vital role not only in the construction of the narrative but the circulation of the novel. Therefore, just as Xue's explicit intertextuality leads us not away from China, the nation, but in some ways reroutes us back towards its historical textual experiences, so too can we see elements of the local and the national in his world-shaped novels. Indeed, as Walkowitz reminds us, a novel that is "born translated" is certainly not "from nowhere" (20). In the case of *Dr. Bethune's Children*, national legacies and traumas, as well as local censorship practices, have played an instrumental role in the formation of the work as world-shaped, and a major reason for its circulation beyond mainland China.

These tropes of translation and mobility are another textual feature that dovetails with Walkowitz's idea of a world-shaped and born-translated novel. Written and re-written in English and then Chinese, and then translated back into English — at one point, Xue refers to this last step as his novel's *"return* journey" (2017a, 287) — mobility and multilingualism lie at the very foundation of the novel, and this mirrors, again, the transnational journey of the narrative, the themes, and the author himself. By necessity, this is literature written, returning to Walkowitz's definitions again, *from* and *as* translation (2015, 4, 5). These features of the novel render the more common discourse of a Chinese book "marching towards" the "world" problematic. Firstly, as I have been arguing, it is difficult to confidently locate *Dr. Bethune* within China alone. And secondly, the implied image of a novel marching in one direction — from East to West — does not ring true here either. Instead, it has moved back and forth, the narrative first written in essay form in English and then in Chinese, published as a novel first in Taiwan, then in France, then in Canada — and still not yet in China. All of this adds up to create a picture of a novel that is neither singular, static, monolingual, nor the product of a solitary individual. It is, instead, multiple, adaptable to the context in which it is received, multilingual, and constantly made and remade by several different actors.

Circulating World Literature

This article has been, in part, an attempt to explore the ways in which Chinese literature can interact with "the world" without falling back on certain discourses that deny Chinese authors and readers textual agency, for example, that Chinese literature seeks to "march towards" the West from the East, or that world literature must inevitably be judged by Eurocentric standards. It is somewhat inconvenient, in that case, that when we turn to the discussion that has surrounded the translation of Xue Yiwei's own works into English, it seems that some of these same narratives reappear.[15]

The marketing of Xue's works in English follows a pattern that will be familiar to any regular reader of translated Chinese literature and, most likely, would be decried by Stephen Owen: a combination of establishing Xue's "local" stylings whilst also affirming his connection to Western points of reference.[16] An endorsement from Ha Jin, which adorns Xue's first few books published in English, is a good example of the ways in which Xue is positioned as a Chinese answer to members of the global (Western) literary canon: "Xue Yiwei is a maverick in contemporary Chinese literature. . . . For him, to write is to make a pilgrimage to his masters: Joyce, Borges, Calvino, Proust" (Xue 2016b).[17] As noted earlier, Xue himself often speaks of his main inspirations, all of whom are non-Chinese, mostly Western, authors.

He has also spoken repeatedly of the processes by which he helped make his books more identifiable to an English-speaking readership, and in doing so, has revealed a shrewd understanding of the various actors involved in the process of circulating his texts beyond China and his self-positioning as a Chinese writer in an Anglophone world. To take an example, we might briefly turn to his *Shenzhenren xilie* or "Shenzheners' series," a number of short stories which were written in Chinese and published in mainland journals between 1997 and 2012, and which include the aforementioned "Country Girl," "The Physics Teacher," and "The Playwright." When collected into one volume in 2013, they were originally published under the title *Taxi Driver* (*Chuzuche siji*), after the most famous story in the series. Four years later, the collection was published in Montreal in an English-language version translated by Darryl Sterk under the

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[15] This section focuses on one example of an English-language translation of Xue Yiwei's work, but his novels and short stories have been translated into other European languages, including German, French, Italian, and Swedish.

[16] The authors who have written jacket endorsements of his books, Ha Jin and Jung Chang, occupy the same literary space as Chinese authors recognized by Western audiences.

[17] This approach is repeated in Chinese-language criticism as well. See Lin Gang's assessment of Xue's novel *King Lear and 1979*, which contains echoes of Chen Duxiu's 1917 search for "China's Hugo Zola, Goethe, Hauptmann, Dickens, or Wilde": "For the first time, Chinese literature has a truly modernist novel, a work that can stand shoulder to shoulder with the classics of Western modernism" (Lin 2021b, 40). See also Lin (2021a, 14)

new title of *Shenzheners*. On being asked why the Chinese and English-language volumes had different titles, Xue stated:

> First of all, I wanted to avoid using the same title as *Taxi Driver*, that Oscar-winning movie that was a household name in the Anglophone world. Secondly, and more importantly, I wanted to demonstrate the connection to *Dubliners*, which is also a household name in the Anglophone world. (Xue 2018b, 89)

The connection to Joyce was underscored by a new dedication that Xue wrote specifically for the English-language edition: “To the Irishman who inspires me” (Xue 2016b). Meanwhile, his publisher Linda Leith chose to model the book jacket on recent publications of *Dubliners* to further underline the link (fig. 1) (Leith 2016). It is of note that this circulation outwards then had a clear impact on the book within China: the publication of *Shenzheners* in Canada not only attracted media attention in China and Chinese-language outlets but also led to a rewriting of the original, with the new Chinese edition published in 2017 under the title *Shenzheners* (*Shenzhenren*), in specific recognition of the event of its publication in English and, later, French (Xue 2018b, Xue 2018c, Liu 2017). The way in which the collection “marched out into the world” is made much of in the aforementioned media reports, as well as on the new book jacket, which also declares that the stories “astonished Canada” (Xue 2017b) (fig. 2).

Figure 1: Covers of *Shenzheners* as published in Canada (Xue 2016b) (left) and Dubliners (Joyce 2008) (right).

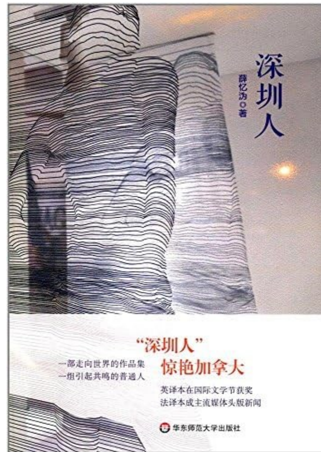

Figure 2: Cover of *Shenzhenren* (Xue 2017b).

These strategies might be interpreted as an example of what Bonnie McDougall calls anxieties of “out-fluence”: a desire to establish China’s literary significance outside of China by emphasizing the ways in which the text falls in line with Western literary values, producing “impulses to imitation” (2003, 228). In making so much of Xue’s inspiration from, and similarities to, James Joyce and in emphasizing the significance of the English-language publication in the new edition of the Chinese collection, one might see echoes of the anxious desire of Chinese writers to level up to Western literature and, perhaps, a conviction that Western audiences are unable to comprehend much beyond their “own” literary space.

But I suggest that this is an unnecessarily narrow way of approaching the link between Chinese and Western texts, which limits our understanding of both the processes in which texts link together and the results of such connections. This article has been arguing for a consideration of Xue’s work as born-translated, multivalent, and multilingual texts. If we consider his willingness to change titles and underline connections to Western authors for the English-language translation within this context, then what appears is not an anxious, restrictive attempt to meet the West’s approval but an acknowledgement of the inherent openness of his works. Think, again, of Xue’s nod to the readers of the English translation of *Dr. Bethune’s Children*, who would “give this novel an extraordinary new life” (Xue 2017a, 288). We might also think of Xue’s unusual practice of regularly rewriting his own works (McGillis 2016). A world is always in the state of becoming (Cheah 2008; Wang 2017; Tsu 2010). Equally, a text that moves through a world literary field, affected by multiple actors beyond the author himself, is also always being brought into being.

It has not been the aim of this article to suggest that Xue Yiwei’s literature has overcome the conceptual or practical difficulties of bringing Chinese literature into dialogue with the world, nor has it intended to gloss over the

unevenness of the world literary playing field, which undoubtedly still exists, nor can it be denied that Xue Yiwei's own literary influences and inspiration are drawn from Western canonical works. What this article does argue for is an attempt to see the other, less conspicuous acts of agency and world-making that can exist despite the continuing vexations of reading a Chinese text in a Western-tilted field. If we consider texts in terms of their interior or innate worldliness, with multiple starting points and belonging, as Walkowitz puts it, to "more than one language" (2015, 14), then we catch a glimpse of the ways in which Chinese literature can continue to engage with the idea of "world" literature and world literary markets without automatically labelling it as marginal or belated. Xue Yiwei's works are one example of this, demonstrating how, in a deliberate search for a "wider and stranger space," it is possible to create a world that is flexible, multilateral, and polyphonic — filled with voices that speak to each other — and shaped by an endless number of actors.

Acknowledgements
[Author would like to add these.]

Glossary

Bai Qiu'en de haizimen 白求恩的孩子们
Banzhuren 班主任
Bei Dao 北岛
Chuzuche siji 出租车司机
Cungu 村姑
Chen Duxiu 陈独秀
da yi shi 大意是
Dai Sijie 戴思杰
Guo Feng 郭峰
Jinian Bai Qiu'en 纪念白求恩
Juzuojia 剧作家
Li'er Wang yu 1979 李尔王与 1979
Liu Xinwu 刘心武
Shanghai baobei 上海宝贝
Shenzhenren 深圳人
Shenzhenren xilie 深圳人系列
shouchaoben 手抄本
yu shijie jiegui 与世界接轨
Wei Hui 卫慧
Wuli laoshi 物理老师

Xue Yiwei 薛忆沩
zouxiang shijie 走向世界

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