

BOOK REVIEW

Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明: *Chen Xiaoming Anthology* (full 8) (陈晓明文集, 八卷本), Guangdong Peoples Publishing House (广东人民出版社), China, 2023. ISBN: 9787218158068.

Chen Xiaoming's eight-volume anthology, published in January 2023, is a collection of his years of literary research. It is excellent in scope and ideas, covering his most representative works. As Li Jingze said, Professor Chen has been a theoretical explorer and creator in his academic career of more than thirty years, and there is a kind of "heroism" and "romanticism" in him.¹ So, what are the specific signs of this theoretical adventure, heroism, and romanticism in his practice of criticism of novels? It mainly combines the theory and practice of Prof. Chen's criticism of novels to make a brief statement.

Do literary research with literary methods. Contrary to the current Chinese academy, which focuses on historical research methods, whether it is studying modern or contemporary literature, i.e., the research method originating from the Chinese Qianjia School and the neo-historicist approach in Western theories, Prof. Chen believes that literary research should be conducted with literary methods. In his view, many essential theories, such as feminism, postcolonial theory, and cultural studies, emphasize the close analysis of texts. However, in the specific practice of literary criticism, there is always a tendency to leave the text aside to find the historical materials behind the text. Although the method of historical research is no less valuable in the specific practice of criticism and can lead to exciting research, literary research should nevertheless return to the analysis of the text itself and focus on the following questions: How is a novel constituted? In an aesthetic sense, in terms of artistic expression, what are its redeeming qualities? How does it come to tell the story, and how does it recognize its time? ² Chen's emphasis on the "internal" study of literature in his critical conception and practice reflects his keen observation of the obscuration of literary research by historical research in current literary studies.

However, the emphasis on the "internal" study of literature is not to the point that the "external" study of literature should be completely ignored. Prof Chen's study of Chinese writers in the context of modernity is a concrete example of this. Although Prof Chen's

¹ Wang Jinzhi, Lai Yanxiong (王金芝, 黎燕雄), "Providing important "algorithms" for contemporary scholarship and literature—Providing Important "Algorithms" for Contemporary Scholarship and Literature - Book Launch of Chen Xiaoming *Anthology* and Abstracts of Expert Speeches at the academic Symposium on "Literary Paths in the Context of Chinese Modernization" (《为当代学术和文学提供重要“算法”——〈陈晓明文集〉新书发布会暨“中国式现代化视域下的文学路径”学术研讨会专家发言摘要》), *GBA Literary Review* (《粤港澳大湾区文学评论》), no.3, 2023, p.154.

² Chen Xiaoming, Zhang Wenxin (陈晓明, 张闻昕), "Breaking the Frontiers of Literature: Exploring and Extending the Boundaries of Criticism--Interview with Prof. Chen Xiaoming" (《破文学的阵: 对批评边界的探索与延伸——陈晓明教授访谈录》), *Commentaries on Literature and Art* (文艺论坛), no.2, 2024, p.036. The same article quoted below only credits Mustang in the text.

emphasis on studying literature through literary methods advocates the “internal” study of literature, he also attaches great importance to the “external” literature study. In his study of modernity, for example, he believes that the history of modernity has not yet ended in today’s China and that, as people who are part of this historical process, our reflection on modernity is still in progress. As a writer, he can only find his narrative, his expression of the fate of his characters, and his way of life by going back to history.

Chen pointed out that Chinese writers such as Yu Hua and Mo Yan have written outstanding works on the issue of expressing China’s modernity. However, critics ignore the exploration of modernity in these writers’ works and do not appreciate them. At the same time, Chinese writers are conservative in their approach to modernity. They limit themselves to using a complete story to embody a modern, complete, purposeful, and centered narrative rather than breaking free from the constraints of the aesthetic sense of modernity and using a postmodern, more changeable, and varied approach, such as that used by Marquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, to break out of the original framework and have more variations and richer expressions.

As for modernity, Chen has also incorporated it into his practice of literary criticism, using the theory of modernity to interpret China’s seventy years of literary history, as reflected in his monograph *The Main Tide of Contemporary Chinese Literature* (《中国当代文学主潮》). “My understanding of the changes we went through in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1980s is in the context of the process of modernity. For example, I understand the literature of the 1950s as a process of the radicalization of modernity. Understanding radical modernity in this way prevents us from judging it purely politically as left-wing or overly politicized” (037). The advantage of interpreting the history of Chinese literature from the perspective of modernity is that, although the program of radical modernity is somewhat radical, it does not prevent discussing some concrete problems. Discussing these problems, “one must not only see them superficially politically but rather as an inevitable consequence of the radicalization of the development of modernity” (037). Prof. Chen provides a new perspective and theoretical approach to re-examining the literary history of this period through his critical practice of thinking about China’s seventy years of literary history with modernity as the starting point.

A fundamental methodology of literary criticism is essential to return to literature and re-examine Chinese literature’s history. Here, Chen underscores the transformative power of the most basic but crucial method: close reading of texts. He emphasizes details, “Literary works have details, and it is the details that can touch the reader” (039). Close reading is important because it allows the reader to delve into the rhetoric of the text’s sentences and the psychological details of the characters, as well as to approach the text and the scene.

Regarding the importance of close reading, Chen posits that the entirety of contemporary literary criticism, from the New Criticism to the Semiology of Literature, is close reading. This is particularly evident in Derrida’s critical practice, where every philosophical question is unveiled through reading a text. “Textual criticism is grasping the literary work to reveal and present how history, philosophy, and literature are intertwined” (039). Close reading is markedly distinct from the “historical approach,” which utilizes the literary text as a historical resource and material. The method of close reading also incorporates the historical material, some trends, and backgrounds of the

period. Still, the crux is the internal relationship of the text itself, the narrative in the text, the character portrayal in the text, the psychological description in the text, and the rhetorical means in the text. These elements are interconnected, and what is resurrected is a literary world, “and in the world of literature you then concentrate on the relationship between literature, history and philosophy” (040). In terms of close reading and literature itself, Chen’s emphasis on the basic method of close reading is the most pertinent suggestion for literary reading and critical practice. This approach also invites the audience to actively participate in the re-examination of the history of Chinese literature, fostering a sense of engagement and involvement.

Theoretical Interest and Philosophical Concern. Chen’s literary studies are based on deep theoretical knowledge, and he is well-versed in Western literary theories, with Derrida’s theoretical concerns being the most persistent. He believes that of all his books, *Derrida’s Bottom Line* (《德里达的底线》) is the one that took the most effort. It was written over ten years. Chen stresses that reading Derrida’s books has had a tremendous intellectual impact on him and that Derrida’s angle of thinking, ability to generalize knowledge and vision, and attitude of challenging the difficulty of thought and pursuing the limits of thought have significantly influenced him. There are many traces of these influences in Chen’s critical practice. Instead of pursuing what is stable and visible to everyone, he looks for what other readers and even writers themselves do not perceive, reflected in his critical practice of re-examining the seventy years of China’s literary history with modernity as the starting point.

It is worth noting, however, that although Chen emphasizes the difficulty and limitations of pursuing ideas and discovering what others have yet to discover, he does not set the creation of his theory as a goal. While acknowledging that China’s current literary criticism lacks its original theories and needs to establish its academic path, he stresses that it should be “based on China’s reality and incorporate the world’s excellent academic achievements” (043).

In addition to his profound theoretical knowledge, philosophical concerns are a constituent part of Chen’s academic research. The article “Beginnings, Renewal and Spirit or Ashes - A Trial of Heidegger on the Historical Consciousness of Hölderlin’s Poetry” (《开端、更新与精神或灰烬——试论海德格尔论荷尔德林诗的历史意识》) is representative in this respect. This essay, true to the author’s words, talks about Heidegger “but thinks about the problems of twentieth-century China as well as the current problems of our time” (044). In this article, Chen challenges his idol Derrida’s argument about why Heidegger first avoided the question of “spirit” but then talked about it. Chen argues that Heidegger’s initial avoidance of the “spiritual” question was out of caution and fear and that his later “leap” was because he thought he could think about, face, and even practice the “spiritual” question. The essential reason lies in how the thinker perceives the connection between his thoughts and social practice, and the difficulty lies in the fact that such a judgment is strict to make because the relationship between thought and reality is very subtle and full of contingencies. This article is more inclined to philosophical thinking outside of literary criticism. Still, under the philosophical theme, it has a deep concern for reality, which, as mentioned above, is the problem of China in the twentieth century and the current problem of this era. We can see that Chen is not just a critic for the sake of criticism but a contemporary scholar with humanistic concern and depth of thought.

The roots of Chen's literary criticism are returning to literature and reflecting on the society and history in which we are embedded. Whether it is the method of history or textual reading, theoretical or philosophical, or modernity or Derrida, Chen's literary research has warmth and care. It is based on his reflection on the world. As a researcher, he observes and interprets the inside and outside of the novel, and what he puts into writing is not only the external symbols but also his care and reflection on the world (not only literature). In a way, his words give us a glimpse of his inner world.

Dr. Xu Sun, School of Chinese Language and Literature, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China. Email: Dukenjames@163.com.