

## How Postmodern Literary Theory Entered China and Exerted Influences

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**Abstract:** This article reviews and examines the five stages during which postmodern literary theory currents gradually entered China and exerted influences since the 1980s. With a significant amount of empirical evidence, the paper demonstrates that the influences of the Western postmodernism filtered slowly through the field of Chinese literary theory in the process during which Chinese literary theoretical circle did not unreservedly embrace the theories but accepted the influences through borrowing and assimilation, refutation and criticism. The paper takes the essentialist way of thinking as an example and expounds the characteristics of the positive and negative impacts which the postmodern literary theory has on Chinese theories.

**Key Words:** postmodernism; literary theory; introduction of the theory into China; influence

The ideological trend of postmodernism literary theory popular in western countries since the middle of last century introduced in China at the beginning of 1980s has exerted a great influence over the literary theory circle of China since new period after being translated, criticized, argued and accepted for over 30 years. The significance of ideological trend of postmodern literary theory cannot be left out when it comes to the discussion of the construction of Chinese literary theory from new period to new century. It is justifiable to say that it is the entrance of ideological trend of postmodern literary theory that has changed the development pattern of Chinese literary theory at the turn of the century from a series of important aspects. The positive and negative influences of postmodern literary theory on the contemporary Chinese literary theory have been discussed in another

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paper of mine. It will be discussed in this paper that how the ideological trend of postmodern literary theory entered China and that how it has exerted influences.

## 1. Five Stages after Western Postmodernism's Entrance to China

First of all, it is necessary to briefly look back on how postmodern literary theory entered China and Chinese literary theories' acceptance of it as well as its development trend since the new period. Specifically speaking, the whole process can be divided into five periods, emergence period (1979-1985), development period (1986-1990), promotion period (1991-1995), prime period (1996-2000) and new change period (2001 to this day).

### 1.1 Emergence Period (1979-1985)

Postmodern literary theory, as a heterogeneous ideological culture, mainly entered China by the translation of foreign study in small quantity in this period. Relevant translations focused on the concept of postmodernism itself. It has developed in western countries for many years, but is still fresh to Chinese academic circles. Such a translation has blown the horn for the later ideological trend of further landing in China.

### 1.2 Development Period (1986-1990)

There was an important change after domestic literary theory circle accepted postmodern literary theory during this period, namely the extension from foreign literary research field to the research field of literary theory and aesthetics with the appearance of a lot of more weighty papers and translations. It is roughly estimated that there are about 80 academic papers with the theme of postmodernism in China, the majority of which are about literature and art. Many professional newspapers such as *Wenyi Bao*, *Literary Theory Newspaper*, *Literary Journal* also introduced it, and some even published long papers about postmodernism ideology of foreign scholars. For example, the twelfth edition of *Contemporary Foreign Art*' leaderette, points out that postmodernism is a very noticeable phenomenon in European and American Art and culture in recent years. There are many arguments on postmodernism whether it is the backwash or the development of modernism. Some hold that postmodernism is the combination of elite culture and mass culture, which is the sublation of modernism, while others think that postmodernism has preserved some basic features of modernism and adopted new form so as to be adjusted to the

demand of post-industrial society. This trend not only gets involved with culture and art, but also social and philosophical ideology, which has broadened the horizon of domestic literary theory circle.

### ***1.3 Promotion Period (1991-1995)***

1980s is an age full of ambition and ideal for Chinese scholars. Literary theory circle has shifted from idealism to empiricism gradually after a decade of enlightenment passion. The ideology of postmodern literary theory has entered the full development phase featuring large quantities of research papers and heated discussions in this regard. It is roughly estimated that there were over 300 academic papers with the theme of postmodernism published in China during this period, a majority of which were involved with literature and art. Books on postmodernism written by Chinese scholars also appeared.<sup>1</sup> Besides, nearly all researchers in domestic literary theory circle participated in the process of accepting postmodernism to some extent in order to carry forward it or make it more suitable for domestic use. Postmodernism has exerted more positive influence than negative one over the broadening horizon for Chinese scholars and improving thinking pattern and research methodologies.

### ***1.4 Prime Period (1996-2000)***

With the deepening of China's Reform and Opening up and the boom of market economy during this period, some characteristics of modern consumer society have shown up. Values shared by people have changed and the social trend of pursuing something unconventional instead of thought in depth prevailed. All of these corresponded elements of postmodernism, thus giving rise to the ideological atmosphere and cultural space of it. The acceptance of postmodern literary theory research in China reached the peak in such context with over 400 relevant papers published. In addition, more and more literary theory scholars and researchers in relevant fields, including those who study literary history and literary criticism, both have joined in, which make it white-hot and applied. Books directly related to the ideology of postmodern literary theory written by domestic scholars have boomed, which greatly contributed to the growing influence of postmodernism in China.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, aesthetic culture of the transitional period has been put into a broader research scope as it corresponds to postmodern literary theory, which predicted the coming of domestic cultural research and the combination of the ideological trend of postmodern literary theory and cultural research.

### ***1.5 New Change Period (2001 to This Day)***

The acceptance of postmodernism ideological trend has obviously shifted to the di-

rection of cultural research upon entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Discussions and debates on daily aesthesis featuring postmodernism and a series of relevant issues have aroused a new round of shock wave in contemporary China. In other words, postmodernism ideological trend has gained new impetus with regard to its influence over China's literary theory circle for the last decade which it has enjoyed a most active development. There are more than 400 papers with relevant themes and over ten monographs and translations in this phase<sup>3</sup>, and compared with those published before, they boast better academic quality.

The acceptance and influence of postmodern literary theory in China during this period have the following basic features. First, more fields have been accepted. Various areas, including literary theory, aesthetics, cultural research, Chinese classic literature and contemporary literary criticism, have all experienced the strong radiation from postmodern literary theory and made adjustment accordingly. In other words, the process of sinicization of the ideological trend of postmodern literary theory is more thorough. Second, the emergence and boom of cultural study, a new variation of postmodern literary theory, have further activated and pushed forward the spread of postmodern literary theory in new China. Third, more intense debates have taken place among different concepts. Such as the idea of "anti-essentialism", which is regarded as a banner by many postmodern literary advocates. It has aroused the attention of a large number of scholars in literary and art circles and a series of important issues related to discussion and contention. What draws our attention is the dialogue and argument between senior literary theory scholars and the younger generation scholars. In one word, the influence of postmodernism in China has witnessed further development both in breadth and in depth.

## **2. Influence Develops in the Contradiction of Learning, Absorption and Refusal**

The brief review of the five periods mentioned above doesn't mean that postmodernism's spread and acceptance in China is smooth all the time. On the contrary, it has exerted extremely complicated influence in China with twists and conflicts, sometimes in an implicit way. First, this influence has shown as a diachronic and gradual process. In the new period, mainly in different periods since 1990s, the influence scope of China literary theory gradually expand, the influence degree is increasing, impact level deepen. Second, the occurrence of influence has been filtrated and selected by the local Chinese context, as shown in the constant changes and

shifts of focuses, the synchronization of western diachronic theories as well as the misunderstanding of this synchronization process. Third, there is no such highly uniformed body of western postmodernism literary theory. Actually it includes various schools and ideologies, some of which even opposite to each other. There are two trends of postmodern literary theory which seem to be on the contrary but actually supplement each other: deconstructive postmodernism aims at dissolving all binary opposition with strong deconstructive and critical spirit of anti-authority and anti-tradition, which stresses subversion and destruction, objects ration and favors inconstancy; constructive postmodernism features positive, affirmative and constructive characteristics, which pays more attention to the relationship between men and nature, others and society, that this relationship is internal, essential, and tried to construct a harmonious organic whole. Different postmodernism literary theories exert their influence in Chinese context at the same time, with some getting stronger or more explicit while others getting smaller or more implicit. The three aspects mentioned above contribute to the complexity of the acceptance and influence of postmodern literary theory in China, which deserves our full attention.

It specially needs to be pointed out that there is an influential opinion in the academic circle that Chinese literary world has embraced western postmodern literary theory with open arms without any defense, and instead, it has been fully accepted and preached. Therefore, it is implied by some that postmodern literary theory is considered as a model of wholesome westernization of contemporary Chinese literary theory. However, it is not the fact. Large quantity of proof will be listed to show that the acceptance and influence of postmodern literary theory ideology is a process of learning, absorption and refusal as well as contradiction and game of critic. Not long after the end of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in the 1980s, China set free from seclusion just began to be affected by postmodern literary theory and artistic ideology artistic ideology such as stream of consciousness, surrealism, expressionism, existentialism, absurdity, etc. and applied them to literary and artistic creation when Chinese scholars found the appearance of postmodern literary theory which had been prevailing in western countries for about two decades, which was, however, a mystery to the majority of them. It is justifiable to say that there were no overheated acceptance nor blind copy of postmodern literary theory at that time. Instead, it was accepted to a little extent selectively and critically on the basis of calm and discrete observation. Only at the time of the earliest systematic in China lectures in the introduction, discusses the postmodern literary theory and with the greatest impact in the academic circles of American scholar Jameson, his famous paper “realism, modernism, postmodernism” translated in the third

issue of *Literary and Art Studies* in the 1986 published simultaneously “translator press” in this paper give a partial affirmation at the same time, it is also careful to point out: “it is worth noting that the author only see the difference between post-modernism and modernism, and neglected the contact between the two” (Jamson 133), which is the proof.

Changes at the beginning of 1990s that the two ideological trends, modernism and postmodernism were spread parallelly or interweavingly. However, comparatively speaking, the development of modern literary theory slowed down while postmodern literary theory was fully under way. As mentioned before, the third and fourth periods witnessed scholars’ rising enthusiasm, wider circulation of postmodern literary theory, great increase of translations and monographs. Meanwhile, heated discussion and diversified debates also caught our attention. Even in these periods there was no practice of blindly worshiping foreign things and total and uncritical acceptance. As a matter of fact, upon the postmodernism’s introduction to China, some were in favor of it while others kept cautious and resistant. The mainstream was a rational and dialectical attitude towards postmodernism held by humanities intellectuals with academic mind and broad horizon. Let’s take some of them as examples.

Wang Yuechuan is one of the most active introducers and researchers of the ideological trend of postmodern literary theory at the beginning of 1990s. <sup>3</sup>He is the first one who summarized it in terms of theory. First, Wang thought the ideological trend of postmodern literary theory was a cultural tendency and a problem of cultural philosophy and spiritual value. It abandoned all certainty of depth and went to the flatness of spiritual dessert and uncertainty. Ideological dimension of non-centricity, anti-dualism and anti-integration plus the framework of weighing process over purpose constitute distinct characteristics of postmodernism theory. Wang’s critical summary of postmodernism literary theory ideological trend was widely accepted by circle of literature and art and aesthetics circle later and exerted important influence. He treated postmodernism literary theory ideological trend with clear and introspective mind from the very beginning, and said that “we should soberly face the trend and reflect on its gain and loss instead of blindly following it and losing our own ability of judgment. Any uncritical approval, denial or imitation of postmodernism show no promise. We should grab the key point of the dilemma of postmodernism with the combination of history and logic so as to gain perspective of its essential situation” (“The Spectacles of Postmodern Cultural Aesthetics” 48). Wang further discussed the basic features and main issues of postmodernism in terms of ideological orientation and value orientation at the mid of 1990s, and he emphasized its nihilism concept and clear critical consciousness while affirming its

positive significance over the transformation of Chinese literary theory and culture (“Postmodernism and Chinese Contemporary Culture” 175-185). It is justifiable to say that Wang has successfully acted as both the transmitter and critic of western postmodernism.

As a matter of fact, there are more than a few scholars similar to Wang in the literature circle. For instance, Wang Ning also dedicated himself to the introduction and research of postmodernism ideological trend of this period. He held that as a world view, postmodernism is a suspicion against epistemology and ontology. As a pan-cultural phenomenon, it reflected various contradictions and features of post-industrial society; as a literature ideological trend, it transcends realism and rebels against modernism, which has a certain continuity with modernism, and not without fracture; And whose appearance symbolized that western literary and art of later capitalist period had fallen into a crisis. In his opinion, “we should inspect, analyze and criticize it with the attitude of historical materialism of Marxism” (“Postmodern Elements in Contemporary Chinese Literature” 48), and that “the right attitude is to understand and study it so as to facilitate the equal academic dialogue between our research results and those of western scholars.” (“Postmodern Variant in Contemporary Chinese Literature” 85), indicating that Chinese scholars were trying to initiate an equal dialogue with western postmodernism literary theory.

As Zhou Xian who attempted to discuss the dedifferentiation feature of postmodernism from the perspective of cultural and social concepts pointed out, “the dedifferentiation of postmodernism is not a trend that returns to classical culture or modern culture in general, but instead, a broken cultural type dominates postmodern culture.” (Zhou 36). Thus he found a paradox that “On one hand, the privative cultural structure is placed by certain unitary structure; on the other hand, the whole culture is in a broken state without a centre. Subjects living in postmodernism has always been enveloped by sense of fragment.” (Zhou 36) It is justifiable to say that his concept has transcended the pure introduction, absorption or simple denial and criticism, and instead, rational criticism has been put forward. Let’s take another example of Zhang Xudong who has been engaged in research and teaching in America for a long time. He held that western postmodernism should be strictly distinguished from Chinese postmodernism, “strict and technique postmodernism theoretical discourse in China is basically the product of western theory in that the detailed analysis object of this theoretical system is of western world. Once we shift our focus to the detailed reality of China, we are likely to feel the abstractness or even void of postmodernism theory. However, the abstractness, void and uncertainty may be the actual starting point of the discussion of Chinese postmodernism.”

(Zhang 17). His concept, based on the realistic context of China's contemporary society, emphasized the adaptability problem of western postmodernism in China, which is quite insightful. Tao Dongfeng who maintained a more distinct standpoint in this regard believed that the discussion of postmodernism should not only be an academic issue but a practice one, not only cognitive issues, but also value issues, which needed to be inspected from the double perspectives of the general constitution of China's contemporary cultural structure and strategies of Chinese culture at the turning point of century. He pointed out that the premature appearance of postmodernism cultural elements in contemporary China would destruct the modern enlightenment movement with strong momentum, which will be caught in the "loss of resistance to the value of nothingness, meaning the loss of the sad situation"(Tao Dongfeng 55). In other words, we should be cautious and critical about the postmodernism deconstruction center and value nihilism.

The critical absorption and acceptance of postmodern literary theory among these scholars prevailed in Chinese academic circle during that period.

So did senior generation of scholars. Qian Zhongwen partially affirmed the criticalness of postmodernism literary theory when he proposed neo-rationalism in the 1990s. He pointed out that "the cultural trend of postmodernism not only sets free people's mind and promote the transformation of people's thinking pattern, but also dissolves the previous value and spirit of cultural legacy. As some scholars note, 'God, king, father, ration, history and humanities have passed despite the remaining in the garden of faith. We have killed the gods.'" (Qian 43) Qian didn't approve the comprehensive deconstruction of postmodernism, but held the same criticalness towards the abuse of instrumental reason as postmodernism did. He said that "old ration has its prime time, and now it keeps developing towards extreme rationalism. Scientific ration has gradually evolved into extreme instrumental ration and pragmatic ration; impacted by extreme rationalism and pragmatic rationalism, humanistic ration has been severely destructed. Ration fails to realize its promise of building a wonderful kingdom for one thousand years." and that "old ration and extreme rationalism oppress human's emotion. They restrain the appearance of human emotion, development of humanity, formation of character and personal creativity by blind political superstition or religious belief." (Qian 43). This criticalness can be regarded as Qian's partial acceptance of modern critics of postmodernism. He didn't approve the complete denial and deconstruction of ration on the part of postmodernism literary theory on the general.

There is no doubt that the majority of Chinese academic circle held a positive attitude towards the introduction and application of postmodern literary theory to the construction of Chinese literary theory and criticism. As Zeng Yanbin was dedi-



cated to the discussion of the oriental cultural background and its process of postmodernism, he held that despite many essential differences between China's contemporary social background and western postmodernism background, cultural hegemonies and cultural permeation police of the first world have contributed to the fact that China has accepted or even imitated western postmodernism. More importantly, it is because of the similar background of China to that of western postmodernism ("The Background and Process of the Orientalization of Postmodernism" 12). He further compared and discussed the similarities and differences between postmodernism poetic theory and Chinese poetic theory, and noted that there was apparently a same standpoint between them. ("Postmodernism and Chinese Poetics" 13-19), which provides a detailed thinking pattern of the integration of postmodernism and Chinese literary theory from ontology skepticism and skeptical ontology, misinterpretation of poems and poems without forced interpretation, language meaningless and the meaning is implied. Some scholars paid attention to the probation of the new-type thinking pattern behind the depth of postmodernism and affirmed that postmodernism ideology was of positive significance to us. And noted that no trend of literature thoughts does not have certain rationality as the basis of existence, on the whole, we should say that the thinking space provided by postmodernism is not only broad, but also profound. It inspires us not to think about questions in a "one-way" way, but to rethink about problems and rethink the thought itself. (Jiang Jingnan 29). In one word, despite their active taking part in postmodernism ideology, they pursued a critical and analytic approach towards it.

On the other hand, some scholars kept calm and analyzed the reason of postmodernism's shift from flourishing to decline in China during the 1990s. They thought that postmodernism met the strong spiritual desire of China during that period: first, it can be used to describe and interpret, which satisfied peoples' strong desire to recognize and understand the social and cultural reality of China at that time; second, it provided a rare opportunity for cultural radicals to pursue rationalism, skepticism and criticalness; third, conservationists in China could take the chance to raise a tide against western imperialism, colonialism and hegemonism. However, with the fading of the above mentioned reasons, postmodernism began to decline in China in the later period of 1990s. He predicted that "it can be expected soon that postmodernism will be knocked out" (Ji Guangmao 71). Similarly, there are scholars on the basis of combing the theoretical and operational characteristics of postmodernist literary criticism in China in the 1990s, and it is certain that the academic history of postmodernist criticism is to provide new discourse for contemporary Chinese literary criticism. Also aware of the "postmodernist criticism in China has been signs of decadence from flourish." (Tan Guilin 5). In spite of the

fact that it seems the prediction is not totally correct in that postmodern literary theory is still exerting influence in China in new form, it shows that some scholars still held sober attitude towards postmodern literary theory.

Nevertheless, a few scholars attached more importance to the negative influence of postmodernism literary theory, and believed that there was blind praise of it in the academic circle. Stressing that “the negative impact of postmodernism on Chinese literary circles is not underestimated”, and its negative nature is summarized as four points: First, “from ‘anti-interpretation’ to the resolution of ideal and loftiness”; second, “by digestion to elegance and vulgarity to non-elegant vulgar and kitsch”; third, “from the ‘anti-logocentrism’ to ‘anti-mainstream politics’ and ‘anti-mainstream ideology’”; four, “from the idea of writing is a game of art which the ‘literature is not the performance of what, only concerned about how to express’ to find literary and artistic writing ‘rules’ and ‘performance techniques’” (Bao Zhongwen 19-20). Although the postmodern “anti-logocentrism” is misinterpreted as “logical centrism” here, the four-point criticism is not unbiased, but this view proves that since the 1990s, the ideological trend of domestic postmodern literary theory is not always a sure and blindly accepted, Actually, voice of caution and criticism has never ceased.

Postmodern literary theory in China has not decayed or disappeared in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and instead, it gained further development, an obvious evolution and deepening towards cultural research, which is a new change in the new century, thanks to the postmodern context in China swept by the tide of globalization at the turn of century. Both Chinese and western academic circles have realized that the context of globalization is actually that of postmodernism. Some Chinese scholars pointed out that “although China’s development is later than western countries, our development of economy and society has been influenced by world trend against the background of globalization, and cultural development is no exception.” (Lai Daren, “The Expansion of Visual and the Holding of the Literary” 154). Besides, he interpreted that “Some of our cultural types have shown obvious postmodernism characteristics... apparently, China’s economic and social development has not fully entered post-industrial society, but in terms of people’s material and cultural consumption concepts and hobbies, we have entered a consumer society ahead of time.” (Lai Daren, “Literature and Literary Theory in the Global Age: Where to Go and What to DO” 5). Many issues of postmodern literary theory and cultural attention have entered the literary and art circles of China against the new context of globalization. These issues are no longer existent outside Chinese context, but instead, integrated into it and become the internal issues which need to be answered on the part of Chinese literary theory. In other words, with the juxtaposition of

pre-modernism, modernism and postmodernism in contemporary China, despite of the fact that postmodernism has not become the mainstream, it has developed gradually. Such being the case, western postmodern literary theory and culture have won the Inner need and basis of being accepted by Chinese literary and art theory circles .

However, even so, the dialectical attitude and basic situation of the critical acceptance of western postmodernism literary theory on the part of Chinese literary and art theory circles have remained unchanged, which is still in line with those of 1990s. Wang Yuechuan summarized and introspected the process of postmodernism's being accepted in China at the beginning of the new century, and held that as a radical criticism and denial of modernism, postmodernism cultural ideology was dragged into the cultural dispute of China by some intellectuals at the beginning of 1990s, which seemed to have something related to Chinese culture. Meanwhile, the extremity and heterogeneity of postmodernism ideological trend and the complexity of Chinese culture's position have contributed to the fact that Chinese scholars held varied value attitudes towards postmodernism ideological trend. Some of them actively promoted it, some criticized it violently, while others remained calm and observed it. Generally speaking, radical criticism predominated Chinese circles at the early period of research, and people began to maintain a more comprehensive and detailed analysis attitude towards it after the turning of new century against the background of globalization. (Wang Yuechuan, "Reflecting Postmodernism in China" 5-8), which consists with the fact.

Senior scholar of Chinese literary theory Tong Qingbing held that "western literary theory is part of human civilization, the critical absorption of whose essence is also the share of human civilization results. There's nothing humiliating. It is unadoptable to completely discard or accept western literary theory. There is no doubt that western literary theory has opened up a new horizon for us and input great vigor into the disciplinary construction of literary theory of contemporary China, which is also of great help to the establishment of new literature system" (Tong 143). This is a very dialectical attitude. Some scholars directly approved the function of postmodernism literary theory in the construction of Chinese literature, and held that the active learning from postmodernism could help change the rigid knowledge structure, disciplinary system and research methods (Chen Taisheng 52-56). Some other scholars made a thorough investigation of an important type of postmodernism from the perspective of scientific principle, namely the incompatibility of Derrida's deconstruction theory and Chinese literature, and held that "we should review on the practice of direct application of Derrida's concepts and theories to literary criticism" (Xu Liang 66). Despite the two different concepts, it is

very convincing to discuss how to accept postmodernism in accordance with scientific principle in terms of the development reality of Chinese culture and literature.

Above all, some scholars have noticed that the acceptance of postmodernism in Chinese literary theory circles has been a complex process in that it is full of paradox and debate. Different opinions in western context have given new, destructive and open characteristics to postmodernism. The acceptance of postmodernism theory's shift from deconstruction to construction has showed the more peaceful mind and broader horizon of Chinese literary theory circles. "It can be taken as a typical example of western theory to be spread in China." (Dong Xueming and Gong Ming 146) . The theory circles in China initially panicked about this theory, and the acceptance process has always been interwoven with the identification of authenticity, also faced with fierce opposition, which itself is changing with the times. With the advancement theoretical interpretation, we can witness the change of attitude towards the study of Chinese literary theory in the new period. On one hand, Chinese academic circle has become more and more open and rational; on the other hand, it also has begun to earnestly construct their own postmodernism. In my opinion, the conclusive reflection is objective and practical.

In summary, the acceptance, spread and influence of postmodern literary theory have taken place in the contradiction of reference, absorption and refusal, as well as criticism, which is reasonable as a whole. A few scholars pointed out that we have blindly worshipped and fully accepted postmodernism, thus leading to the westernization of contemporary Chinese literary theory, which is inconsistent to the fact. Besides, such criticism has underestimated the discernment, contemplative faculty and digestion ability of Chinese literature and art theory when it comes to the acceptance of foreign theoretical ideology to some extent.

### **3. The Interaction between Positive and Negative Influences: Taking the Thinking Mode of Essentialism as an Example**

In my point of view, the ideological trend of postmodern literary theory has exerted double influence over Chinese literary and art theory circle, and generally speaking, positive influence outweighs negative one. <sup>5</sup>It needs to be pointed out that the acceptance, spread and influence of postmodernism literary theory has taken place in the contradiction and game of reference, absorption and refusal, as well as criticism, therefore, the positive influence and negative one are inseparable and interactive to each other, which is pronounced in their impact on people's usual thinking

mode and change. This paper discusses the characteristics of the dual influences by taking the thinking mode of essentialism as an example. One of the most direct influence of postmodernism in contemporary Chinese literary and art theory circle is the discussion of essentialism and anti-essentialism lasting for years. As some scholars have pointed out, it is the introduction of postmodernism literary theory that has caused severe shock in domestic literary theory circle and finally triggered the debate between essentialism and anti-essentialism till now. The theoretical debate constitutes an important event in the literature circles of the new century. It “has provided a issue domain or discourse field with vast coverage and high comprehensive degree for the study of Chinese literary theory. With the gradual expansion and integration of the discussion scope, problems covered have be presented and furthered. As a matter of fact, some profound and implicit problems in the discourse construction of contemporary Chinese literary theory have been touched from the two perspectives of knowledge and ideological value, which has great boosted the discourse enthusiasm of scholars. The mass participation and full expression of various academic ideas have exerted positive influence over the promotion of the study of Chinese literary theory in the new century.” (Dang Shengyuan 26). Although the peak has passed, the discussion has remained till now.

It is actually a globalized debate in the worldwide as to that between essentialism and anti-essentialism, the former is one of the core issues of postmodernism’s criticizing modernism and modernity in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Postmodernism objects logocentrism advocated by modernism and metaphysics of presence. It opposes the idea that matters have unified and unchanging essence, thus opposing the thinking mode of pursuing the only essence as the goal, namely the thinking mode of essentialism. This concept and method have penetrated and influenced literature theoretical circles from every fields and channels of humanities since the 1990s, which have been resisted or criticized in Chinese context and at the same time, accepted or approved to certain degree. Widespread and enduring discussion has been launched about the essentialism and anti-essentialism on the part of Chinese literature theoretical circles with the flooding of postmodernism literary theory since the 1990s.

In my view, essentialism mainly refers to the thinking mode that everything has sole, absolute and fixed essence, which is regarded as the ultimate goal of academic study. From the perspective of anti-essentialists, this is a rigid, secluded and dictatorial thinking mode and knowledge production mode. In the literature circles, essentialism has become a chronic thinking mode for the majority of scholars for a long term, featuring the concept that the primary mission of literary theory lies in

the pursuit of fixed essence and definition of literature and unfolding discussion on a series of basic literary problems on this basis, while anti-essentialism doubts the existence of sole and fixed essence of literature and favors the contextualization, historicization and diversification of essence, and then the possibility and necessity of the study on literary essence.

The influence of postmodern literary theory on Chinese literature circles is dual. On one hand, it has impacted and shaken the essentialism and habitual thinking mode shared by many scholars for a long time, and facilitated the abruption and application of the reasonable part of antiessentialism's thinking mode; on the other hand, the impact and influence tend to be too extreme among some scholars. The former is positive, while the latter is negative. However, it is difficult to distinguish the two influences as they are interwoven. Sometimes they are embodied in some or certain scholars or theoretical issues, which is hard to lump together.

As I observe, at first, the positive influence is reflected in the fact that a group of young and middle-aged scholars with keen thought have accepted the theoretical concepts of anti-essentialism at first and used it to introspect and criticize the thinking mode of essentialism prevailing in Chinese literature circles for a long time by being closely connected with the reality of contemporary literature theory studies and criticizing the prime task of seeking for the unitary and unchanging thinking mode of essence, thus dedicating themselves to the advocacy of the thinking mode of constructivism of literature. Such introspection and criticism with momentum have caused great shock and impact, without which the habitual thinking mode of essentialism in academic circles would not be breached.

Second, essentialism has accepted or absorbed some reasonable concepts of anti-essentialism to certain degree in fact while defending the legitimacy of its study of literary essence. For instance, some scholars have affirmed the objection to "arbitrary theory of essentialism" is "on the extreme, rigid, dogmatic essentialism" of the backwash and challenge, part of the literature will certainly explore the nature of context and historical point of view, some scholars have put forward the concept of essential system, and pointed out that "the essence of literature is fluid and the rigid and dogmatic understanding of essence must be abolished." (Lu Guishan 6), which is quite close to the anti-essentialism concept.

Third, some scholars haven't stuck to the omnibearing criticism of the thinking mode of essentialism, but instead, attempted to transcend the theoretical structure of essentialism and gained results, most typical examples of which are the *Literary Theory (new edition)* by Nanfan editor, *Literary Theory* by Wang Yichuan and *Basic Issues of Literary Theory* by Tao Dongfeng. Fang Keqiang has discussed the accomplishments of the three textbooks in many articles<sup>6</sup>, and pointed out that they

“all correspond to the challenge of postmodernism context and go against the thinking mode of essentialism to certain degree.” In varying degrees, both attempts to oppose essentialism and focus on the construction of systematic literature and art. They deny the “essence” of objectivity, permanence and uniqueness of essentialism thinking mode, and make essentialism essentialism and non uniqueness. However, they have adopted different strategies to break essentialism and reconstruct literary theory: Nan Fan has adopted the editorial thought of relationalism distinct from essentialism; Tao Dongfeng the reconstructed thought of “historization and localization”; Wang Yichuan the theoretical thought of “nativism”. Despite the fact that the three textbooks are exploratory and premature, there is no doubt that they have stepped forward and gained primary success in the objection of absolute essentialism and the attempt to reconstruct new literary theory of non-essentialism. In this regard, Fang Kejiang concludes: “After the departure of essentialism, China’s singular, capitalized essentialism ‘theory’ loses its aura, appeared many, lowercase anti-essentialism ‘theory’ of mutual competition”. Fang keqiang's summarization is very objective and precise.”(Fang 5)

It can be deduced that there are no essential divergences in the criticism of rigid, extreme and dogmatic essentialism among the majority of scholars in dispute, which means that the reasonable nature of the thinking mode of anti-essentialism has been interiorized and in fact, changed the habitual thinking mode of academic circles.

The negative influence of postmodern literary theory has also taken place synchronously. First, some scholars have run to extreme on their concepts of some issues in anti-essentialism. For instance, they are in favor of cultural turn and the cancel of essence. Second, some scholars have totally denied the anti-essentialism concepts and criticized them as relativism and nihilism in spite of the fact that the typically ragescent and absolute essentialism are uncommon, which is partial as well. Such being the case, academic circles are likely to return to the old path of the thinking mode of essentialism. In this regard, Fang Kejiang concludes: “After the departure of essentialism, China’s singular, capitalized essentialism ‘theory’ loses its aura, appeared many, lowercase anti-essentialism ‘theory’ of mutual competition”. Fang keqiang’s summarization is very objective and precise.”

According to the above analysis, it is clear that the influence of postmodernism on Chinese literary theory in terms of anti-essentialism is dual and interwoven. It sometimes seems to be positive while showing negativity, or negative while showing positivity. The critical point lies in the dialectical attitude of Chinese literary and art theory circles acceptance of western literary theory, namely the game between critical acceptance and accepted criticism, which requires a dynamic balance.

This situation can be proved by its extension in academic circle during the recent years. Here are two examples:

The first example is the argument between two young scholars, Wang Wei and Li Zixiong<sup>7</sup>. It is not difficult to find out that there are no essential divergence between their standpoints, according to some of their articles, and that they are all in favor of anti-essentialism. However, Wang is more radical and holds that Li is not thorough in his anti-essentialism effort. He has put forward that there can be two interpretation of anti-essentialism, namely anti-essentialism and antiessential-ism, which are slightly different from each other in that the former has been advocated by not a few scholars who oppose unitary essence but are in favor of multi-essence, while the latter hold that there is no such thing as “essence” at all. Wang has pointed out that Li belongs to the former category and that “they are stepping back in their journey of anti-essentialism and actually, they are on their way of essentialism again.” Obviously, Wang belongs to the latter. He criticized Li’s concept that “What anti-essentialism is capable of deconstructing is the literary essence in the sense of historical ideology. What has no deconstruction or cannot be deconstructed is the aesthetic essence of literary transcendence”, saying that it has admitted that aesthetics is the eternal essence of literature.

However, we can spot Wang’s misunderstanding of Li by carefully reading Li’s papers. First, Li approved Wang’s distinguish of the two types of anti-essentialism, and pointed out that he did not fully deny the existence of essence while Wang believed that there was no essence at all, which is in line with Wang’s concept. Second, Li agreed with Wang that the understanding of literature cannot be separated from history. But he pointed out at the same time that it didn’t mean that “there is no literary essence.” That is to say, literary essence, which is not fixed and unitary, can be and should be discussed and researched. Therefore, they primarily share same understanding of anti-essentialism. As a matter of fact, Wang’s concept in his paper that “once back to the continuous reproduction of historical context, the constructivism of literary essence will naturally show up” seemed to show that he didn’t totally disapprove the research and saying of literary essence on the premise of following the constrictive thinking mode of history. Third, as for the literary aesthetic essence, Li quoted Lai Daren’s concepts in his paper that “The problem lies in the fact that whether there needs to be a measurement of matter’s change over time. To be more specific, there at least should be a qualitative regulation as to the matter. If the change of matter has passed or had no regulations in this regard, then we can doubt whether it can be referred to as a matter. In the literary history all around the world of all times, the qualitative regulation has never changed despite the changing types and concepts of literature, which is the aesthetic



significance of literature as a linguistic art and imaginary art. It is what we use to define and interpret literature. (Lai Daren, "The Current Crisis of Literature Affords No Negligence" 43). I agree with Lai, and besides, the modern meaning of literature has been gradually constructed and established since the 19<sup>th</sup> century at home and abroad, and it is at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the concept of literature has been integrated as a whole featuring aesthetics. In spite of many changes of the specific modes and genres of literature in the information and internet age, the qualitative regulation of aesthetics has remained without radical change, which is still steady and effective.<sup>8</sup>The essence in terms of literary can be studied and interpreted from the perspective of historical context and constructivism, which doesn't mean that essentialism is obvious. Therefore, the basic standpoints and attitudes of the two scholars are consistent, but Wang may be a little extreme in his total denial of the interpretability and discussability of literary essence.

Interestingly, Li was critical when it comes to the three textbooks as we mentioned above. He criticized that Fang Keqiang's summary of Wang Yichuan's rhetoric as nativism presupposed certain essentialism thinking mode, that Tao Dongfeng failed to draw a final conclusion of literary essence, and that Nan Fan's relationalism was another type of essentialism as it showed worship to power discourse. Wang Wei affirmed the contribution of the three books in breaking anti-essentialism, of which I am basically in favor. However, Li's criticism is radical and partial to some extent. The debate between the two young scholars shows that postmodern literary theory has exerted huge and profound influence among young and middle-aged scholars. It is worth noticing that the positive and negative influence tends to interact.

Let's take another example. In my view, Gong Jushan's *Multidirectional Generative Theory of Literary Essence*<sup>9</sup> is the most dialectical, profound and convincing paper on the issue of literary essence that I have read so far. It opposed the deep-rooted thinking mode of essentialism, stuck to the speakability of literary essence and interpreted the original multidirectional generative theory, which is a good summary of the debate between essentialism and anti-essentialism. It raised a question that "Does literature have essence or not? Or is it necessary to pursue the so-called literary essence in literary research?" The answer is very clear, "Literature has an essence, which is not fixed and universal.", which affirmed the rationality, possibility and speakability of literary essence. At the same time, the paper discussed three reasons restrictive to literary essence, including the institutional discipline of national ideology, the asymmetrical limitation of cultural geography and the subjectivity identity of literary interpretation, and interpreted them from various

aspects and dimensions respectively. He pointed out that those elements interacted with each other. Therefore, literary essence must be a value identity consisting of the multidirectional generation of various subjective and objective elements, hence the concept of “multidirectional generative theory of literary essence”. The paper has not terminated the discussion on literary essence, however, the anti-essentialism thinking mode of multidirectional generative theory has been an important enlightenment to the further exploration of such issues.

### Notes

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- 3 Some important works include:  
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Chen Xiaoming. *Postmodernism*. Henan: Henan University Press, 2004.  
Cui Shaoyuan. *Postmodernism and Euro-American Literature*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Publishing House, 2002. and so forth.
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  - 8 “Reflective Criticism on the Negative Influence of Western Postmodernism Literary Theory.” *Literary Research*, no. 1, 2014, pp. 39-50
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