CHAPTER 9

The Cosmopolitan Imperative: Qian Zhongshu and “World Literature”

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The author of Jin Ping Mei is certainly a genius, but his learning is that of a Boddhisattva, not that of a Confucian sage, for his message is that everything is empty. If he had taken the further step to non-emptiness, he would have written a different book.

— ZHANG ZHUPO, “How to Read Jin Ping Mei,” c. 1695

The story of China’s “long twentieth century” surely centers on the question of how that country adapted to the new world it had been forced reluctantly to join in the second half of the nineteenth. Now in the twenty-first century, many of the scientific, technical, and managerial issues that so bedeviled Chinese thinkers since 1860 have, arguably, been solved. Yet more general questions of values and intellectual orientation remain as much in suspense as ever. This seems to be all the more the case in the realm of aesthetics. In the domain of literature in particular, the search continues for a genuinely “Chinese voice” that represents the particulars of the Chinese situation, with all its internal tensions and complexities, while attaining universal aesthetic validity. The ideal remains as elusive as ever.

During the twentieth century, prose fiction, for a variety of well-documented reasons, was the primary zone of engagement in the search for this new and apposite means of literary expression. This chapter examines the Chinese pursuit of such literary cosmopolitanism by reexamining one work often nominated for inclusion in the modern canon. Fifty years ago, the encyclopedic critic and historian of modern Chinese fiction, C.T. Hsia, had this to say about Qian Zhongshu’s novel Fortress Besieged (Weicheng 围城, serialized 1946–1947), first published in Shanghai in the immediate post-war years: “The Besieged City is the most delightful and carefully wrought novel in modern Chinese literature; it is perhaps also its greatest novel.”2 Hsia’s judgment was seconded by many Chinese critics and seemingly also by the reading public when the novel was

1 Zhang, “How to Read Jin Ping Mei,” 94.
2 Hsia, A History of Modern Chinese Fiction, 441.
republished in China in 1980, a generation after it first appeared. *Fortress Besieged* was one of the older works resurrected in the post-Mao “new period” as part of an effort on the part of those commissioned to restore cultural equilibrium in the years after the Cultural Revolution to demonstrate the continuity of modern Chinese culture. Hsia’s high praise was particularly resonant thanks to the centrality of the novel form to modern Chinese literature as an institution. Qian’s creative writing lasted little more than one highly fraught decade, from the mid-1930s through the 1940s. Yang Jiang, his wife of sixty-plus years, who was the first to achieve success as a writer, has been engaged in creative writing for over seventy years now. Like Qian, Yang has written stories, a novel, prose essays and criticism, if in a rather more sedate register than her late husband. Also like Qian, she wrote only one full-length novel, *Taking a Bath* (*Xizao 洗澡*), published in 1987. For all the differences between the two texts—*Taking a Bath*, for instance, encompasses a much smaller spatial scale—both novels share a common tone that paradoxically both disputes and affirms the singularity of the modern Chinese experience. This voice poses a challenge to the ordinary ways that the modern Chinese experience has been expressed.

Qian Zhongshu believed the Chinese literary realm to be characterized by a palpable universality. His contribution to the search for a modern means of expression was a powerful effort to juxtapose Chinese and Western aesthetic discourses using his profound erudition in both traditions, and to emerge with common themes. This goal, a veritable cliché in modern Chinese literary studies—as expressed in the frequently uttered wish to join “world literature”—has proved difficult to put into practice for Qian’s contemporaries and successors. Qian went about this pursuit in an oblique fashion. For one, his deployment in the novel of a complex Chinese vernacular taking advantage of the wide range of possibilities for word-play in the language, has rendered it virtually impervious to successful translation, and thereby limited its appeal to an international audience. According to one oft-cited criterion for inclusion in the realm of “world literature,” “a work only has an effective life as world literature whenever, or wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture.” Qian’s very success in working with the full

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