

## Modernist Waves: Yang Lian, John Cayley, and the Location of Global Modernism in the Digital Age

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The worry that using the term *modernism* might turn twentieth-century Chinese literature into “a diluted story about repetition” is itself a recurrent theme in modern Chinese literature.<sup>1</sup> Such worries were redoubled during the revival of the term in mainland China in the 1980s and extended into debates about Chinese literature in the 1990s and beyond, when anxiety was fueled by the increasing profile of Chinese artists and writers abroad, by the worldwide expansion of new information and communication technologies, and by the post–Cold War rise of economic globalization, in which China played an increasingly central role. Writers associated with the 1980s revival of modernism, such as the poet Yang Lian 杨炼 and the novelist Yo Yo 友友, continue to feel the need to distinguish themselves from slavish adopters of foreign forms. “If one gives up self-questioning, art becomes the same as plagiarism; by adopting the language of American or European art movements, Chinese art plays into the hand of Western hegemony,” Yang and Yo Yo argue, before going on to ask, “Do artists have the right to steal and sell second-hand products simply because they are ‘Chinese artists?’”<sup>2</sup>

These concerns about “subscribing to Western cultural hegemony” echo Stephen Owen’s analysis of another poet associated with 1980s Chinese modernism, Bei Dao 北岛 (Tang, “Lu Xun’s ‘Diary of a Madman,’” 1222). Owen describes Bei Dao as exemplifying the new phenomenon of “world poetry,” which “turns out, unsurprisingly, to be a version of Anglo-American modernism or French modernism, depending on which wave of colonial culture first washed over the intellectuals of the country in question. This situation is the quintessence of cultural hegemony, when an essentially local tradition (Anglo-European) is widely taken for granted as universal.”<sup>3</sup> In describing the wave of Euro-American modernism washing over various non-European countries and traditions, Owen’s 1990 review anticipates one of the most influential

1 Xiaobing Tang, “Lu Xun’s ‘Diary of a Madman’ and a Chinese Modernism,” 1222.

2 Yang Lian and Yo Yo, “Stepping Outside Post–Cultural Revolution.”

3 Stephen Owen, “What Is World Poetry?,” 28.

recent accounts of modern literary history on a global scale: Franco Moretti's argument that world literary history can be understood as a series of waves translated from culture to culture. For Moretti and other world-systems literary theorists, the apparent plurality of modernisms is merely the result of the "interference" produced when essentially the same literary form, such as the novel or modernism, washes into a new language, culture, and tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Writing in the early 1990s, Xiaobing Tang took a different view, arguing that modernism in China named "all discursive practices opposed to a repressive political order" rather than the imposition of "an old-fashioned and essentially Western label on the twentieth-century Chinese literary tradition" (Tang, "Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman,'" 1225, 1222). Extending Tang's thesis a few years later, Xiaomei Chen claimed that, far from being merely a pale imitation, modernism in mainland China in the 1980s meant something quite different from modernism in the West and that this "misunderstanding" of Western modernism, in Chen's nonderogative sense, functioned as a counter-discourse to official ideology.<sup>5</sup> Tang and Chen helped inaugurate another influential approach to world literary history, whereby Chinese and global modernisms were reconceived as a plurality of responses to global modernity.

In this essay, I argue for an alternative framework that adopts the metaphor of modernist waves but rejects the dichotomy of sameness and difference and the static notions of Chinese and Western through which both these competing approaches to Chinese and global modernism have been routed. I do so by considering a work that deploys the wave metaphor to address its own uncertain position both inside and outside China and Chinese modernism: Yang Lian's long poem *Dahai tingzhi zhi chu* 大海停止之处 (Where the sea stands still), written in 1993 and first published in 1995, and Yang's subsequent collaboration with Anglo-Canadian programmer-poet John Cayley on the transformation of the poem into the digital HyperCard and performance piece *Where the Sea Stands Still*.<sup>6</sup>

Yang and Cayley's collaboration and their use of the wave as a figure for their practice allow me to explore the shortcomings of both Owen's and Chen's accounts of Chinese modernism. Although Owen and Chen contradict each other, both rely on relatively fixed conceptions of cultural location and cultural

4 Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," 58–66. Moretti here builds on an idea put forward in Frederic Jameson "In the Mirror of Alternate Modernities," xiii. Moretti borrows the term "interference" from Itamar Even-Zohar, "Laws of Literary Interference," 53–72.

5 Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism*, 69–98.

6 Yang Lian, *Where the Sea Stands Still / Dahai tingzhi zhi chu*; John Cayley and Yang Lian, *Where the Sea Stands Still*, performance reading.