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Research on social formations essential to classical studies

Classical studies have drawn growing scholarly attention in recent years, yielding substantial progress in the collation of classical texts and the elucidation of their meanings and underlying principles. Yet these achievements should not obscure a fundamental point: The ancients did not leave behind a storehouse of ready-made, directly applicable answers, but a rich intellectual treasury whose insights remain inexhaustible. Only by re-situating classical texts within the specific social conditions in which they emerged can scholars truly take the pulse of civilization and draw on its enduring spiritual resources.

Every classical text is a product of particular social conditions. Classical studies cannot be conducted in a historical vacuum, nor can scholars engage in abstract speculation detached from “social formations.” A core concept of historical materialism, social formations offer a general account of the ways societies exist and develop. In this framework, human society advances from lower to higher stages through five successive formations, each representing the unity of an

economic base—corresponding to a given level of productive forces—with its superstructure.

The “Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought” in China’s pre-Qin period (prior to 221 BCE) emerged amid a profound transition from kinship-based clan society to territorially organized society. Ancient Greek philosophy, by contrast, took shape within the commercial and artisanal spheres of the city-state. Both traditions were deeply rooted in the productive forces, relations of production, and sociopolitical structures of their respective historical contexts. Social formations fundamentally shape ideas and beliefs, just as the economic base profoundly influences the contours of the superstructure. To wrench classical texts from their social soil and treat them as absolute truths beyond all constraints of time and place is to risk obscuring the realities of history and misreading the wisdom of the ancients, leaving classical studies rootless and without foundation.

Carrying forward a civilization’s legacy therefore requires a scientific

mode of thought and conscious vigilance against two extreme tendencies. The first is a nihilistic form of historical relativism. Different peoples and nations begin from different conditions, and their historical transformations do not follow identical paths. This does not mean, however, that civilizational development has no objective patterns, or that history is merely a meaningless accumulation of accidents. Denying the broad tendency of social formations to evolve from lower to higher stages would deprive historical judgment of an axiological criterion and civilizational inheritance of a secure foundation.

The uninterrupted continuity of Chinese civilization for more than 5,000 years itself refutes such relativism. A sound understanding of the dialectical relationships between productive forces and relations of production, and between the economic base and the superstructure, is essential to grasping the essence of the materialist conception of history and avoiding disorientation amid the complexity of historical phenomena.

The second extreme tendency is



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vulgar economic determinism. The economic base plays a fundamental role in shaping the superstructure, but this does not justify reducing the complexity of history to a single linear logic. Political organization, family structure, kinship relations, religious belief, and other forces also exert important influence on social development. Explaining every phenomenon of classical civilization solely in economic terms, while disregarding the relative independence and agency of politics, culture, and spiritual life, inevitably produces a narrow and mechanistic under-

standing of history.

The ultimate purpose of classical studies is the illumination of both the present and the future. Only by deeply understanding the laws governing the evolution of social formations and firmly grounding classical wisdom in material conditions and social relations can the past be brought to bear on the present and valuable elements of foreign culture be incorporated into the Chinese context.

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JIANG HUI

Global South literature set to mature

As a new critical concept, research approach, and form of historical consciousness, Global South literature is attracting broad scholarly attention. How might it advance the study of foreign literature? What new questions, methods, or shifts in research paradigm might it introduce? Like a powerful magnetic field, the concept is drawing work from disparate areas into a shared academic space. Yet the nature of that attraction—and the field it is creating—remains far from clear.

Some studies adopt the label of Global South literature without engaging its substance, offering neither novel problem awareness nor methodological innovation. Others follow the path of Western critical theory, treating critiques of capital, the state, and Western cultural hegemony as the defining intellectual orientation of Global South literature while overlooking culture’s constructive significance. Still others classify all literature from Asia, Africa, and Latin America as Global South literature. This misses the fact that the “South” is not simply an alternative designation for those geographical regions, but an evolving political, economic, and cultural concept expressed through corresponding practices. Some scholars also struggle to distinguish Global South literature from world literature. At this stage, then, Global South literature remains an active, open, and

exploratory concept.

Conceptual significance

Global South literature points to new forms of global literary production and cooperation emerging amid profound changes in international relations and the global order. These relationships do not signify a rupture with the modernity of world literature, nor do they represent a simplistic reproduction or continuation of existing models.

The dominant forms and ideas of modern literature arose alongside Western nationalist movements and subsequently spread across the world through colonial expansion and imperialism. Over time, they produced three broad configurations of world literature. The first was a global system of national literatures formed after World War II with the large-scale emergence of independent nation-states. The second involved solidarity, translation, and circulation within anti-imperialist socialist literary and artistic blocs. The third grew out of Western postcolonial cultural hegemony and its extension during globalization, eventually producing a transnational literary system in which metropolitan centers became the principal hubs of literary production and consumption.

The emergence and development of Global South literature cannot be separated from these historically

formed elements—the state, capital, and metropolitan areas—which remain the material foundations of literary production. Intellectually, the field cannot sever itself from traditions of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial resistance or from the pursuit of national confidence and cultural dignity, which together gave rise to Southern self-consciousness. In formal terms, it must continue to engage with narrative, literary history, and criticism—the foundations of literary studies.

Despite these continuities, the deeper conceptual significance of Global South literature lies in recognizing the present as a distinct historical moment and giving a new literary epoch a name. Shaped by new forms of global historical consciousness, political aspiration, and cultural innovation, this epoch seeks to transform the existing power relations of world literature. It supports the development of Global South countries, advances social progress, articulates core national values, raises national cultural literacy, and helps educate and unite the public. In this sense, Global South literature elevates a spirit of resistance into a spirit of construction, transcending the mirror image of “world literature” and becoming a self-affirmation of national spirit.

Historical conditions for maturation

From a Chinese perspective, the

historical conditions for proposing the concept of Global South literature are now in place: The global order is moving rapidly toward greater multipolarity, the influence of the Global South is rising, and China’s development path is attracting increasing attention from other Global South countries.

The solidarity of Global South countries in jointly addressing the challenges of development, security, and governance has become a defining feature of the present era. Western ideas of democracy, human rights, and freedom, long regarded as universal truths, have not brought broad-based progress to these countries. As Global South nations become more determined to explore development paths of their own, Global South literature offers a literary expression of that search. It therefore differs from earlier popular literature of resistance and the critical literature of intellectual elites. Instead, it is likely to take shape through substantial state participation while exploring autonomous paths of political, economic, and cultural development.

A further historical condition for the maturation of Global South literature is the transformation of literary production modes in Global South countries under new productive forces. Artificial intelligence, large language models, and other increasingly powerful technologies have not only

propelled the development of digital humanities but also generated new forms of literature and art. Online literature, micro-dramas, animation, games, podcasts, and derivative creative works have enabled ordinary people to become producers of literary and artistic content, broadening participation in cultural creation. New literary and artistic movements emerging across the Global South have also accelerated the localization of knowledge production, enabling more vibrant and dynamic forms of local knowledge and social consciousness to find expression in popular literature and art.

Global South literature is a form of literature that empowers the development of the Global South. It takes national form and expresses national aspirations for development. Its capacity to actively shape history cannot be fully captured by Western concepts such as “world literature” or “post-colonial literature.” This is precisely why the concept is needed today. As Global South countries collectively confront challenges of development, security, and governance, literature, too, has a contribution to make. Although this literature responds to global challenges and carries forward the spirit of resistance associated with “Third World literature,” it warrants a new name: Global South literature.

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