

China's Literary Cosmopolitans

Qian Zhongshu, Yang Jiang, and the World of Letters

Edited by

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Epilogue: All Will Come Out in the Washing

Christopher Rea

todo saldrá en la colada
all will come out in the washing
鹼碱水裏什麼髒都洗得掉

DON QUIXOTE, PART II, CH. XXXVI

Chinese translation by Yang Jiang¹

The book is far from closed on Qian Zhongshu and Yang Jiang. Qian is, of course, dead, and Yang just last year released her *Complete Works*. That nine-volume compendium includes a version of her latest work, *After the Bath* (*Xizao zhi hou* 洗澡之後), which was also published as a stand-alone volume in 2014. That novella, as mentioned in previous chapters, expresses the author's strong desire for closure.

Several archives nevertheless hold the promise of further discoveries. A 2014 conference about Qian Zhongshu co-sponsored by Jiangnan University and Exeter College of Oxford University, and held in Wuxi, offered new information about the couple from Oxford sources. Frances Cairncross (then the Rector of Exeter College) and Chen Li 陳立 revealed, for instance, that Qian in 1935 scored the highest mark on the examination on English literature for the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship in the three years the exam had been held; that he applied unsuccessfully for a lectureship at Oxford in 1937; and that he never supplicated for, and therefore may never have formally been conferred, an Oxford degree.² These biographical details confirm existing impressions of Qian's intellectual brilliance and indifference toward formal academic degrees. The second fact is a revelation, since biographical writings about Qian have invariably described him as being sought after by overseas universities, but never having sought such positions himself.

Much work remains to be done to determine what institutional archives on the couple might exist from Soochow (where Yang studied), St. John's College, Tsinghua University, Kwanghua University (where Qian taught), the Sorbonne, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (where they worked), Beijing Normal University (where their daughter, Qian Yuan, taught), their multiple publishers, and various organs of the Chinese Communist Party and the PRC government.

¹ *Tang Jiehede (xia)* in *yjwj*, vol. 6, 281.

² Cairncross and Chen, "Qian Zhongshu and Oxford University."

The couple's letters have yet to be collected and published. They corresponded widely with friends and scholars inside and outside China, yet only a fraction of these materials are currently accessible to scholars. In 2013, a cache of sixty-six letters by Qian Zhongshu to a family friend was put up for auction, prompting protests from Yang Jiang and charges that some letters were fakes.³ Qian Zhongshu also wrote anonymous works that have yet to be identified. As early as middle school, he ghost-wrote private correspondences and public tributes for his father.⁴ How and how much he contributed to the English team-translation of Mao Zedong's selected works remains unknown. But even published works, such as *Guanzhui bian*, bear re-reading for new insights. Thanks to Yang Jiang and various collaborators, Qian's voluminous reading notes—in Chinese and other languages—from a lifetime of reading are also now being edited and published in Beijing in the Commercial Press's series *Manuscripts of Qian Zhongshu*.⁵ These facsimile reprints of hundreds of Qian's original notebooks will be a treasure-trove for researchers for years to come.

Other details about both writers likely await Yang's passing. The Chinese saying holds that "the final word on a person follows the coffin's close" (*gai-guan lunding* 蓋棺論定). But a more apt proverb may be found in the most famous novel Yang translated, *Don Quixote*: "All will come out in the washing." Yang's Chinese translation of this line refers to "washing out dirt," an interpretation that calls to mind the dirt exposed by the moral scrubbing intellectuals undergo in her novel *Taking a Bath*. But Sancho Panza's original words, *todo saldrá en la colada*, are more ambiguous, referring simply to "all" or "everything" (*todo*). Dirt might indeed come out in the washing, but so might the brilliance of the fabric's colors.

In the case of Qian, it seems likely that some scholars and friends have withheld information out of respect for his widow, who has worked so hard

3 For a sample of news reports and analysis of the controversy, see: Li, "Letters for auction despite widow's protest"; An, "Auction cancelled for three controversial letters"; and You, "Is it illegal to auction off Qian Zhongshu and Yang Jiang's letter manuscripts?" Yang Jiang's version of events is recorded in the "Major Events" timeline she wrote for her *Complete Works*. See *YJQJ*, vol. 9, 508–18.

4 Yang, "On Qian Zhongshu and *Fortress Besieged*," 88.

5 The first three volumes of *Qian Zhongshu shougao ji*, subtitled *Rong'anguan zhaji* 容安館札記 (Notes from the Hall of Modest Contentment), named after the couple's Beijing apartment, appeared in 2003; twenty volumes of notes in Chinese appeared in 2011; and three of a planned fifty volumes of notes in foreign languages appeared in 2014. See Monika Motsch's introduction (available in English, Chinese, and German) to first volume of the latter series for an account of how the project came together. For a brief news report in English, see: Li, "Manuscripts of Qian Zhongshu."

to protect and shape his legacy. Yang acknowledges explicitly in *After the Bath* that to give her fictional characters a happy ending was—in a nod to her first stage play—her “heart’s desire” (*chenxin ruyi* 稱心如意).⁶ The same may be said of some of her efforts to shape public discourse about her family. Yang has sought to preempt readers’ imaginative responses to her work, such as by disallowing fan-fic sequels to her novel, or doing interviews in which she controls both sides of the conversation.⁷ Much of the recent biographical information about Yang and Qian has been filtered through Wu Xuezhao, Yang’s friend and de-facto literary agent, who has been intensely protective of her for at least a decade. Those actions, in my opinion, contrast with the open spirit of Yang’s releasing Qian’s manuscripts in facsimile form, which allows readers to make their own judgments. The interests of scholars aside, time will tell to what degree Qian’s and Yang’s cosmopolitan literary visions appeal to contemporary readers in general.

In any event, cosmopolitanism will likely remain a pressing cultural imperative in China for some time yet. Nationalists fret about China’s persistent lack of “soft power”—namely, its charisma and influence, particularly in the realms of culture and ideas—despite its growing economic power. Foreigners may seek to profit off China, but they are not yet falling over themselves to live there or to emulate Chinese ways of thinking or living—an ardent wish of Chinese intellectuals expressed as early as 1902 in Liang Qichao’s futuristic novel *The Future of New China* (*Xin Zhongguo weilai ji* 新中國未來記).⁸ Some artists have responded by making pop versions of Chinese cultural forms, as seen in the Zhang Yimou 張藝謀—designed Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics—a pageant of tai chi, zithers, and calligraphy. Another government-endorsed strategy has been to “go toward the world” (*zou xiang shijie* 走向世界), a slogan intended to mobilize the populace to close the gap between China and other countries, culturally as well as economically. For Chinese nationalists, Mo Yan’s receipt of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2012 represents, like the Beijing Olympics, another moment of Chinese arrival

6 Yang, *Xizao zhi hou*, 1–2.

7 At age 100, Yang allowed one newspaper interview in which questions were submitted in advance in writing and she chose which to answer. It is reprinted as: “Zuozai rensheng de bianshang: Yang Jiang xiansheng baisui wenda” 坐在人生的邊上：楊絳先生百歲問答 (Sitting on the Margins of Life: Q&A with Yang Jiang *xiansheng* at Age 100), in *YJQJ*, vol. 4, 339–355. On Yang choosing the questions, see *YJQJ*, vol. 9, 501. See also the self-dialogue in *Arriving at the Margins of Life: Answering My Own Questions*.

8 On Liang’s novel, see chapter three of my book, *The Age of Irreverence*.

on the global stage. The drama of figuring out how to make China more international and cosmopolitan is sure to continue for years to come.

The field of Chinese literary studies, meanwhile, continues to evolve its own cosmopolitan imperatives. “Sinophone studies,” to mention just one recent trend, has gained traction in North American academia as a way to move the field away from the mainland-centric, Han-chauvanistic, and nationalistic history of the discipline. Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, minority regions of the People’s Republic, and Chinese-language communities worldwide are coordinates of this new linguistic geography. Diaspora is passé—people settle and break the emotional tether to their mainland Chinese “origins,” becoming citizens of elsewhere. The Sinograph, or Chinese character, has also become a new object of scholarly attention as a living script worldwide that has both shaped and been shaped by modern technologies.

The best of these efforts to make Chinese studies more cosmopolitan offer promising new directions. They expand the field’s geographic purview and aspire to an egalitarian critical ethos, which does not presume the moral supremacy of one writer over another based on his or her physical origins or racial/ethnic identity. At the same time, recent work by scholars such as Rudolf Wagner, Shuang Shen, and Nicolai Volland has shown that the literary landscape within territorial China itself has often been more cosmopolitan than has generally been acknowledged. They advocate paying greater attention to foreign language publishing within China, as well as the internationalist orientation of literary production and cultural organizations during the Mao era. Cosmopolitanism, therefore, far from being merely an unfulfilled ideal of a bygone political era, remains a vital issue in the field of Chinese literary and cultural studies.

Qian Zhongshu and Yang Jiang are important to ongoing debates about cosmopolitanism for several reasons. They were multiliterate writers who traveled farther in their reading and writing than they did in person. Jia Zhangke’s 賈樟柯 acclaimed 2004 film *The World* (*Shijie* 世界) is set in a theme park containing miniature replicas of the pyramids, the Eiffel Tower, and Big Ben, whose slogan, “See the world without leaving Beijing” (*buchu Beijing, zoubian shijie* 不出北京，走遍世界), mocks the migrant worker-employees it confines. Qian Zhongshu and Yang Jiang (Beijing residents since the 1940s) realized the promise of that slogan in their own way. Their example challenges any theoretical paradigm of literary cosmopolitanism that privileges those who live outside their country of birth. They might have seen themselves as living and working on the margins of Chinese society, but they were never overseas exiles. They also wrote primarily in Chinese, not in a non-native language

or the language of a colonial oppressor. These circumstances set them apart from the Nobokovs, Rushdies, and Ha Jins of the world.

Qian and Yang's devotion to literature also sets them apart from the lifestyle cosmopolitans so readily found in many places and ages. Only for brief periods during the Republican era were they members of a heady literary "scene" (Qian, as a writer for *The China Critic* in the 1930s; Yang as a playwright in the 1940s). Both, to be sure, used literature as a vehicle to express personal sensibility and self-image (Qian, the erudite bookworm; Yang, the modest, self-reflective observer). But literature, to them, was no mere ornament. Books stayed, for the most part in the library; reading notes adorned their home. Literature was not just another type of "cultural consumption" to complement movie, radio, and newspaper; it was their primary occupation, as well as being a pastime, a source of pleasure, and a terrain for intellectual exploration. Qian, in particular, was exhilarated by similarities in figurative language, rhetorical techniques, and concepts found in disparate literary traditions, and he dedicated much of his career to identifying and analyzing them. Yang was and is a more conventional literary scholar, but her creative writing covers a wider range of forms, genres, and modes than Qian's. Together, this pair of writers offers a new starting point for understanding the capacity and willingness of modern Chinese writers to navigate, interpret, and expand the world of letters.