

# Reflections on the “historicization” of Chinese contemporary literature

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**Abstract:** After the 1990s, “historicization” has become an important trend in the study of modern literature. The “historicization” research of modern literature has undergone the evolution from one-sided text criticism to overall construction, thinking and in-depth development of “historicization”, which is the inevitable product of the academic turn and discipline consciousness after the 1990s. “Historicization” is an important academic practice accumulated by the Chinese School in the study of modern literature: “Historicization” is the process of transforming the academic thought of Chinese literature into a kind of “localization”. “Historicization” is a process of self-reflection and self-renewal, as well as a reflection on history. “Historicization” is the process of unifying explanatory reason with historical agency, that is to say, unifying it with historical agency. The process of exploring “historicization” shows that simply copying the previous theories, isolating literature from the contemporary, and separating from literary criticism cannot be considered as a “historicization”. “Historicization” has not completely ended, calling for new exploration and new endowing forms.

**Key words:** Chinese contemporary literature; “Historicization”; ponder

## I. Reflection on the “historicization” of modern Chinese literature

### 1. Simply copying the existing “historicization” theory

“Historicization” should not copy Western theories, nor should it copy traditional historical theories. For example, if Jameson’s theory of “eternal historicization” is blindly promoted without reflection, and “intellectual archaeology” is the only way, it will certainly fail to respond to the specific problems of modern Chinese literature. Li Yang’s theory of “eternal historicization” on Jameson is earlier, but he still has the traces of enlightenment thought on Hong Zicheng’s literary thought, and carries out “historicization” treatment on it. However, if all literary values are “historicized”, they fall into a new “myth”. Similarly, in the process of historical development, there are certain historical values and practical significance. In ancient Chinese historiography, the methods of catalogue, revision, edition, textual research and compilation of lost works were adopted, which provided some methods for textual research and tracing the authenticity of history. The study of traditional Chinese history has also shown signs of revival in the field of modern literature history. The belief in historical materials is actually the belief that there is a hidden path to historical truth in them. However, the truth of history does not appear directly in the historical data. To move from materials to historical materials and from historical materials to historical facts requires both scientific interpretation and infiltration of problem consciousness. The study of “historicization” of modern literature can not be achieved simply by copying Western or traditional theories, and it is not surprising that we blindly copy foreign things. From the perspective of “Chinese-style modernization”, the theory of “historicization” must have Chinese characteristics and contemporary characteristics.

### 2. Alienating and obscuring “literariness”

In the early years, Zhang Qinghua put forward “historicization”, “in order to achieve the purpose of science, the understanding of literature is weakened in a sense”, and his worry is not unreasonable. Postmodern writers always emphasize that “literariness” is only a kind of structured thing. There is no absolute concept of “literariness”, only concrete, historical and different “literariness”. This conclusion is reasonable. Although the interpretation of “literariness” varies from period to period, “literariness” is relatively stable and continuous in a specific historical period. “Historicization” and “literariness” does not mean the loss of aesthetic taste. Unfortunately, in practice, in the name of “historicization”, there are indeed many people who have openly expelled “literariness” and twisted, dismembered and even trampled on it with the weapon of history and culture. After practicing “historicization” for many years, in recent years, people’s voice of repositioning “literariness” has been rising. However, we should not reverse the two concepts of “literariness” and “historicization”, and “historicization” and “literariness” should be integrated at a higher level.

### 3. The lack of discipline-based literature research

Gao Yuanbao thinks that in the past 30 years, there has been a phenomenon that “the historical research is not clear, and the literary problem has been left aside” in the research of modern Chinese literature. Some other people think that the essence of historiography is historicization, which is “the absorption and application of new ideology and new theory sources in modern literature research under the new era background”. In fact, at the same time of the “historicization”, the current literary research also has the trend of “historiography”, “historicization” and even “historical materials”. Wu Xiuming believes that the so-called “historicization” means that the current literature is placed in the social and historical context that needs to be continuously interpreted, studied as a relatively unfamiliar object, and gradually constructed the corresponding knowledge chain. In fact, “historicization” not only requires reinterpretation and construction of a new theory of knowledge, but also explicitly puts forward the proposition of using literature as a means. In the past two to three decades, interdisciplinary research has flourished, and theories and methods from many different fields have been borrowed, greatly expanding the research space and space; However, with the development of other disciplines, literature has increasingly become an object and an object.

What is the standard way of literature study? It does not follow the internal research line of aesthetic form, nor does it easily copy the external research line of literary sociology. This literary-centered approach is no longer directly acceptable, but calls for new exploration.

#### 4. The lack of contemporary consciousness

The academic community generally agrees that critical theory is more closely related to modernity. Because of the lack of space and time barrier, contemporary art is less likely to be “historicized” theoretically, and more likely to rely on more objective literary criticism. This rather general concept presupposes a gap between criticism and “historicization” and establishes a class connection between the two. And the practitioners of “historicisation” are thinking about this. Hong Zicheng points out that “historicization” is not “de-criticism”, while Wu Xiuming wants to combine “historicization” with literary criticism. However, due to the aversion to excessive “historicization”, in recent years, some people are even more outspoken about “anti-historicization”, such as “Nietzsche once said that too much history will make life become deficient and degenerate”, calling on people to rethink the “contemporaneity” and the value of criticism. In fact, the most persuasive criticism lies in identifying the problem, envisioning the future, and creating new ideas in a scene full of unfinished totality. The path ahead is often brightened by the fiercest criticism. On the contrary, criticism is more about intervention and action, and “research” is a kind of enrichment and sublimation of the knowledge system. The two can be interacted, but not necessarily negated. Historicization is not “salvage” in the simple sense, it is more about looking at and reacting to the present moment. We should advocate criticism with historical significance, and at the same time seek “historicization” in critical action and modernity.

## II. The empirical research of modern Chinese literature from the perspective of “historicization”

### 1. The “historicization” and emergence of Chinese paradigm

Wu Xiuming proposed that the external “historicization” was dominated by Western Marxist scholars such as Jameson, and was ignored because it was “intrinsically related to the Han and Song system of Chinese justice theory”. Although the concept of “historicization” was first put forward abroad, after the 1990s, a group of outstanding Chinese scholars carried out creative development on the basis of both Chinese and Western history and culture, and a theory of “historicization” with Chinese characteristics appeared. For example, in the process of “historicization”, Hong Zicheng emphasized both self-explanation and explanatory reason. The “relevance” theory he put forward has great reference significance for comparative literature, even in the world. In particular, Chinese literati, after recognizing the nature of historical narration, are still searching for “truth” and seeking dialectics of “historicization”, all of which are a key foundation of Chinese “historicization” theory. Hong Zicheng points out that it is a historical obligation to identify the correctness of “real” historical facts and to present them as “reality”. New historicism provides a diversified view of historical knowledge for the study of Chinese historiography, however, the “sober” Chinese intellectuals did not get lost in historical nihilism. Hong Zicheng, Wu Xiuming and Cheng Guangwei, under the baptism of the postmodernism trend of thought, still maintain their belief in “truth”, and constantly strive to pursue “truth”. To rearrange the “historicization” research of Chinese experience and Chinese road is a new starting point of “historicization” research.

### 2. The pluralistic and dialectical characteristics of historicization

Historicization is not only a concept, but also a practical activity. The academic circles have different understandings of historicization. This not only provides rich “historicization” connotation for the study of modern literature, but also forms its internal tension and even contradiction. All kinds of “historicization” practice have their own advantages and limitations, we should cherish and maintain this “historicization” of the openness, diversity and dialectic, rather than limit it to a certain aspect. For example, regarding the understanding of the “historicization” problem, there is a divergence between Hong Zicheng’s “open problem” and Wu Xiuming’s “stable history”. These two seemingly contradictory ideas may be compatible. Both approaches, whether data - or problem-based, have their own advantages and disadvantages. Materialists believe that the purpose of historicization is to make history stable, so that the object under study is enriched in the interpretation of “flow” and “richness.” In this view, the more refined the subject, the greater its’ historical stability. ‘” The aim of the “problem-based”, on the other hand, is not to connect “reality” and “history”, but to reveal the nature of its structure and uncertainty. In fact, historicization is actually the result of the ongoing interaction between the two. The rigid historical narrative requires the “historicization” based on the problem to break through, and the post-opening problem calls for the emergence of “historical stability”. “Historicization” has a variety of methods and approaches, in treating the relationship between history and contemporary, research and criticism, historicization and literature, there should be a more dialectical view and method.

### 3. Interpretation of the combination of reason and historical initiative “historicization”

Criticism is interpretation, interpretation is understanding, and “pre-understanding” is the restriction of understanding. “Historicization” is a return to the historical background of “pre-understanding” to a certain extent, so as to explain how “understanding” occurs. Historicization requires the activity of interpretation to be objective, neutral and rational, and limits the rights of interpreters. Historicization calls for a self-limiting academic interpretation, which requires the interpreter to clearly recognize the source, context and limits of knowledge, and to recognize the limitations of interpretive activities. “Historicization” emphasizes the scientificity and impartiality of interpretation, and its essence is to seek the rationality of interpretation. However, the self-limitation of interpretation does not mean the abandonment of its value orientation and historical initiative. Historicization is a process by which interpretive rationality is unified with cultural values and historical agency. Historicization does not approve of the infinity, randomness and confusion of interpretation, but it does not completely deny the diversity and possibility of interpretation, nor does it deny the historical agency of interpretation. Although many scholars in our country have their own limitations on the practice of historicization, they all have an obvious historical initiative, that is, the

judgment of the historical orientation of the present academic; In the study of modern literature, they have broken and created a new research model. The practice of Chinese philosophy tells us that the organic unity of explanation reason and historical initiative can produce a vitality of “historicization”.

### III. Conclusion

To sum up, “historicization” is the most influential academic mode in the history of Chinese literature after the 1990s, which contains the unremitting theoretical exploration and innovation of Chinese scholars. “Historicization” is an “anti-essence and anti-form view of knowledge”, which breaks through the illusion of “interior” and “aesthetic” in works and realizes the turn from inside out. Of course, outside of “historicization”, there are also many ways worth learning from, and “historicization” cannot solve all problems once and for all. “Historicization” not only contains the rich and varied inquiry and valuable theoretical experience of the Chinese school, but also needs to constantly refresh itself in the process of self-examination and self-reflection.

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