Chapter One

Introduction

Diagnosing the Complex

The question of why China — a country, so it is often claimed, with five thousand years of culture and a language spoken by one fifth of the world’s population — had failed for almost a century to win a Nobel Prize began to be raised with increasing urgency during the 1980s, following the Mainland’s reentry into the international political, economic, and cultural realm. The quest for a Nobel Prize was promoted to the level of official policy and Nobel anxiety evolved into a “complex” (Nuobeier qingjie) that drew in writers, critics, and academics. The task of securing a Nobel Literature Prize — viewed as a passport to world recognition as a modern civilization — generated conferences, a national literature prize, delegations to Sweden and countless articles. In the 1990s, following changes in the national politico-literary climate after the crackdown of 4 June 1989, the Nobel question was dislodged from its prominent public position but continued to rumble underground, reemerging on periodic waves of media hype. Through both decades the issue also mobilized worldwide interest among diasporic Chinese communities. There was a resurgence of Nobel anxiety in 2000: as the prize approached its centenary, Chinese journalists once again prepared articles on why a writer from China had still not won what was seen as the literary Olympics, on how the great modern Chinese writers Lu Xun (1881–1936), Lao She (1899–1966), Shen Congwen (1902–1988), and Ba Jin (1904–) missed out by a hair’s breadth, and so on and so forth.¹

The question invites the rebuttal: why should China win a Nobel Prize? With due respect, how can any committee of individuals effectively judge the “most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency” that has conferred the “greatest benefit to mankind,” as stipulated vaguely in Alfred Nobel’s prize testament? Why should China care about, or even find anything illogical or unfair in the fact that a group of Swedish judges — almost all lacking the ability to read
Chinese—had failed to appreciate its modern literature? In the West, public debate about Nobel rights and wrongs is seldom heard outside the media coverage that erupts around the annual announcement made in October (the private hopes of writers are, of course, another matter). The fact that some European countries have failed to win a prize hardly makes a story, let alone a book. Dutch commentators, for example, are not embarrassed to admit that a prize would be desirable, but the issue does not annually generate dozens of articles in academic and literary circles. But the question takes on a larger significance when we note similarities between the “Nobel Complex” and the preoccupations that have engaged the dominant Chinese intellectual experience of modernity: anxiety about China’s international status, ambivalence towards Western influences and values, and the relationship between Chinese intellectuals (especially writers) and national politics. The plausible barriers between China and the Nobel Prize, namely, ignorance on the part of the outside world, the workings of different literary value systems, and linguistic differences, have often been forgotten in face of the broader anxieties of significant numbers of Chinese intellectuals in the global arena: what is so wrong with Chinese literature that it cannot join the modern world literary order symbolized by the Nobel Prize?

The term “complex” started to be used in the 1980s to discuss Chinese Nobel anxiety and is in itself revealing of the broader context of modern Chinese history. It first of all suggests a psychoanalytical path of enquiry. The Nobel Literature Prize had become a cause of a psychological disorder, a token whose value and authority as imagined in China was inflated out of all proportion to its real importance or exchange value in international letters. In Freudian terms it was an object of desire, the lack of which became a larger symbol for the impotence of Chinese intellectuals in the modern world. Secondly, in addition to its general significance in psychoanalysis, the word “complex” carries very particular connotations in the modern Chinese context. It taps into powerful discourses of sickness and the inferiority of the Chinese character first formulated by modern intellectuals such as Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) and Lu Xun that have survived into intellectual discussions of the post-Mao period. Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century imbibed imperialist views of Chinese racial inferiority, and the project of curing the diseased national character underlay much intellectual reformism. Lu Xun, still the paradigm of modern Chinese intellectual integrity today, saw the question of national character as central to the crisis of modern China, and his prestige and influence sealed the link between literature and national sickness. It is hard to overestimate the degree to which his conviction has permeated the modern Chinese intellectual consciousness. Lydia Liu points out that, as
transforming the national character (*gaizao guominxing*) became the dominant theme in the narrative of Chinese modernity,

many began to accept modern literature as the best means to remedy China’s problems . . . the theory of national character led [Lu Xun and his peers] to justify Chinese literary modernity as a national project whose importance to China’s nation-building efforts fundamentally outstripped that of state wealth, military power, science and technology, and the like.2

Medical and anatomical tropes, Liu notes, have dominated Chinese debates on literary modernity, implying both a fundamental disorder or weakness within China and its literature, and the healing power of literary intellectuals. Lu Xun began training as a doctor before undergoing a famous conversion to literary writing when confronted with evidence of the craven, ignoble Chinese character: “I felt that medical science was not so important after all; when the people of a nation were ignorant and weak citizens, it mattered little whether or not they were physically strong . . . the important thing to do was to transform people’s spirit, and literature and art were the best means to that end.”3 A term such as the “Nobel Complex” is thus compromised from its very inception in the discourses of nationalism and national inferiority that have dogged the Chinese intellectual experience of modernity, in the condition it aims to expose and (by implication) remedy. While directed at rectifying China’s perceived failure to win a Nobel, the Nobel Complex is itself produced by and reinforces this same sense of national inferiority.

It is important to specify what is meant here by the term “Chinese intellectual,” which, at its widest application, can refer to anyone in possession of a high-school education; the bibliography on the subject in both Chinese and Western languages is similarly broad. In the present study the term “literary intellectual” is used to refer to those professionally engaged in literary work: writers, critics, editors, scholars, and so on. The more general term “Chinese intellectual,” however, carries with it a complex package of political, social, and ideological commitments. Indeed, as Vera Schwarcz points out in her account of the May Fourth movement, *zhishi fenzi*, the modern Chinese phrase for intellectual, directly emerged out of the sociopolitical challenges of the 1920s.4 Schwarcz herself views Chinese intellectuals as an educated elite occupying the forefront of social and political reform efforts.5 Perry Link, similarly, in his survey of Chinese intellectual attitudes in the 1980s, *Evening Chats in Beijing*, identifies an important vein of political and social engagement running through the mindset of educated Chinese.6 The engaged stance of Chinese intellectuals has also been characterized famously by C. T. Hsia as an “obsession with China”: an anxious cultural nationalism.7
Despite the general validity of these observations about the intellectual “obsession with China” and nationalism, a consistent, uniform stance throughout China’s intellectual community must not be assumed. In analyzing Chinese intellectual attitudes to nationalism, internationalism, and the Nobel Complex, it is crucial to differentiate as precisely as possible between groups and individuals that fall into the general category of “intellectuals” and “literary intellectuals.” At various points during China’s troubled twentieth century, intellectuals (both literary and nonliterary) have combined resentment of China the nation-state with patriotism for the motherland: modernizing iconoclasm has coexisted with affection for and pride in aspects of traditional, premodern Chinese culture. Attitudes to national and international values have, moreover, become increasingly unstable in the contemporary era of transnational media, migration, and globalization.8 In exploring the significance of the Nobel Complex and cultural nationalism within such an amorphous and diverse category as “Chinese intellectuals,” this study will focus primarily on literary intellectuals, whose attitudes in turn vary both between groups (poets, novelists, critics, and editors; men and women; different age cohorts) and between individuals within those groups. I do not expect the conclusions I draw about certain literary intellectuals to apply uniformly to Chinese intellectuals as a whole, and this book will attempt to avoid the dangers of over-generalization by closely specifying the subjects of its discussion. I have, however, made judgments throughout this study, and particularly in this introductory chapter, about what I consider to be fairly dominant and widespread modes of modern intellectual consciousness, such as anxiety about the vigor and viability of a national Chinese culture in comparison with Western nations. It should be noted that these dominant modes of consciousness are frequently those held and propagated by male intellectuals.

The Nobel Complex is itself a metonym for C. T. Hsia’s diagnosis of “obsession with China” in many modern Chinese intellectuals and writers: their “obsessive concern with China as a nation afflicted with a spiritual disease.”9 Having reinvented China as a nation-state and invested so much hope in its salvational narratives of modernity and progress, certain intellectuals have sought all possible affirmation of their efforts in this direction, namely recognition from the (imperialist) inventor of modernity and progress, the West. In the post-Mao era this desire for recognition has manifested itself in the near-pathological yearning for international prizes and “face”—for the Nobel Prize, for the prestige of hosting the Olympic Games and qualifying for the football World Cup, for entry to the WTO. This yearning has intensified since the 1990s, when rapid economic development and the growth of (particularly urban) incomes have fueled a confident sense of nationalistic entitlement to
markers of international prestige. Even during the Maoist era, although Western prizes were regarded as capitalist and bourgeois, China initially remained eager for recognition from new, politically respectable international sources of authority (such as the Stalin Prize).

But the Chinese yearning to recover the luster of lost glory through winning international recognition is also doomed to ambivalence and frustration, since the global authority from which China has sought recognition is dominated by the West, the very source of China’s international humiliations. China’s sense of entitlement to Western-based international plaudits reveals both a confident belief in China’s superiority and an anxious need for that belief to be affirmed by the West. Modern Chinese have combined an admiration for Western modernity with a resentful inferiority complex towards Western strength and a fear that the Chinese national essence will be lost in the process of modernization. Insecurity about Chinese national identity and the obsession with a diseased Chinese culture have often produced their inverse: a cultural machismo, angrily sensitive to slights and humiliations, that asserts China’s cultural uniqueness. Debate concerning China’s desire for a Nobel Prize has frequently swung from self-criticism to aggression. Geremie Barmé has summarized this as the tendency towards “self-hate and self-approbation” in modern Chinese culture: China is perceived both as a glorious five-thousand-year-old civilization deserving of recognition and a humiliated modern culture inferior to the global standard.

Intense Chinese interest in the idea of a Chinese writer winning the Nobel Literature Prize crystallizes the tensions inherent in China’s move towards a “global” culture in the modern era; it also neatly illustrates the degree to which the responsibility for achieving this task has been laid on the shoulders of literature at various points in the twentieth century. All spheres of cultural and social activity — economics, politics, sports — have been drawn into modern China’s quest for international prestige, but literature, the traditional medium for intellectual expression, has been given special weight in this effort. The Nobel Prize is awarded for the natural sciences, medicine, economics, and peace, yet for decades it has been the literature prize that has been the principal focus of Chinese hopes and worries. Despite the controversy generated by the award of the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize to the Dalai Lama, hopes for a peace prize have not matched the fervor of China’s desire for a Nobel Prize in literature. Interest in the science prize has, admittedly, grown throughout the post-Mao period. A Central China Television (Zhongyang dianshi tai) program of 29 April 2000, for example, asked “How far are we from a Nobel [Science] Prize?” and featured interviews with Chinese-born Nobel science laureates who won their prizes for research done in the United

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States and either already were or later became U.S. citizens. Again, however, the quest for science prizes has not matched the enthusiasm, urgency, and national and political sensitivity that have surrounded the literature prize. While the Chinese state has proved willing to establish friendly public relations with Chinese-born winners of the science prizes long resident in the West, the case of Gao Xingjian, who spent the first forty-seven years of his life on the Mainland but whom Beijing immediately dismissed as a “French writer” after the Nobel announcement, demonstrates this sensitivity. It is the dissident, oppositional tendencies of Chinese writers in exile (including Gao, whose play Taowang denounced the Tian’anmen massacre of 1989) that have made the Chinese state so suspicious of international recognition for these authors. This suspicion is emblematic of the troubled relationship between individual literary intellectuals and a centralized, political national identity, that has endured throughout China’s twentieth-century quest for modernity. International achievements in the spheres of sports and science are judged by criteria far less contentious than those used for literature. Unlike literature—an elite intellectual form—sport provides a far more straightforwardly populist symbolic framework for representing the nation: athletes train their bodies to win Olympic gold medals as members of the larger national body. The development and the denouement of China’s literary Nobel Complex demonstrate the particularly sensitive and problematic status attached to the Chinese literary language and tradition as mediators between national identity and international standing in twentieth-century modernizing schemas.

Changing attitudes to the prize from as far back as the 1920s shed light on the contradictory mix of admiration, resentment, and anxiety that intellectuals and writers have felt towards “international” (i.e., Western) values as they attempted to forge a modern Chinese literary and cultural identity. That so much attention has been paid to an external source of valuation indicates the continued uncertainty of Chinese writers as to their aims and audience, caught as they have been between admiration for the West and anxiety about their role in forging and positioning China’s own cultural identity: should Chinese literature serve a global audience or the nation? Should it address the masses or intellectuals? In short, the Chinese Nobel Complex reveals pressure points in a modern intellectual identity not entirely sure of itself.

The complex also provides a case study for the politics of world literature, highlighting, through the local example of China, the position occupied by non-Western literatures in the world literary economy. Firstly, although intellectual anxieties about modernity and nationhood may appear to be especially acute in the Chinese context, they are in fact part of the broader, global phenomenon of nation-building discourses, in particular as experienced in the
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non-West. Secondly, the sense of inferiority and weakness raised in China by exclusion from the Nobel Prize must beg the question: what, precisely, is the nature of this global culture in relation to which China feels marginal and excluded? Moreover, with all this talk of “global culture,” why raise the question of national identity at all? Is the contemporary global system not ruled by free-flowing postmodern forces that disregard national boundaries and any assertion of dominant positions?

It is true that the international profile of East Asia has risen dramatically since the 1960s, largely due to economic progress in the region, and that cultural products from the non-West have in recent years been making deeper inroads into mainstream global culture. The international success in 2001 of Ang Lee’s martial arts film Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is a case in point. Since Mao’s death, moreover, Mainland China has thoroughly distin-

This introductory chapter sets Chinese intellectual and literary concerns within a global framework of modernity, awareness of which marks one of the crucial points of departure for modern Chinese intellectual consciousness. The quandary of Chinese intellectuals is shared by countless others who find themselves outside the mainstream of modern Western economic and political development. How can they win, or even participate equally, in a game (viz., the right to represent China on a modern global stage) whose rules and
values belong to a Western-based power structure built on social, economic, and political factors that are centuries old? What, ultimately, lies behind the modern idea of “global culture” and the Chinese experience of the term? Finally, we will consider here the specific issue of world literature and Chinese literature’s position within the modern world literary market.

Nationalism, Modernity, Globalization

Scholarship of the last twenty years has rendered increasingly explicit the ties between intellectuals, nation building, modernity, and globalization, starting from the early modern period in the West. Benedict Anderson views the “imagined community” created by fiction and mass print culture as a prerequisite to the formation of a national community, thereby underlining the imaginative, ideas-based origins of nationalism. The works of Liah Greenfeld on Europe and the United States and John Fitzgerald on China have emphasized the role of intellectual elites in forging the idea of the nation. The causal links between nationalism and modernity are more contested. While Greenfeld portrays nationalism as the powerful symbolic resource through which elites since the sixteenth century have transformed their own identities and the social structures in which they lived, Anderson and Ernest Gellner take the view that nationalism was only made possible by the advent of modernity and its concomitant systems of communication and organization, such as mass education and new media. In her analysis of nationalism and modernity in China, Susan Daruvala traces the complex links between these two phenomena; her arguments are helpful in understanding one of the products of their interaction, globalization, or its more abstract companion concept, universality. Daruvala uses the term “second-order modernity” to describe the form of global modernity influenced by the spread of nationalism and imperialism from the West. The fact of this influence in turn has brought ambivalence and inequality both to the expression of the modern global ideal and to China’s bids to attain it.

The leap from the specificity of modern nationalism to the universalism of globalization is somewhat paradoxical and has long bemused scholars. Benedict Anderson articulates the problem as “the formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept — in the modern world everyone can, should, will ‘have’ a nationality, as he or she ‘has’ a gender — vs. the irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations, such that, by definition, ‘Greek’ nationality is sui generis.” The rise of nationalism in both political theory and practice coincided with the heyday of the Enlightenment ideal, universal human reason. In Enlightenment conceptualizations such as Hegel’s
The Philosophy of History, only the individualistic self-awareness of reason leads to a proper understanding of History. If History is the mode of being (namely, a consciousness of past, present, and progress) and the condition which allows the possibility of modernity, “the nation-state is the agency, the subject of History which will realize modernity.” Just as everyone has a gender and possesses reason, they must have a nationality or risk being left behind by History.

If Hegel provided philosophical arguments for tying nationalism to a global universal model, the legal and political underpinnings of this development had been put in place much earlier. The interstate basis of membership to the international, eventually global community had a legislative precedent in the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years War. The Westphalian model holds that the world consists of sovereign territorial states, recognizing no superior authority; the processes of law making are in the hands of these individual states. This treaty continued to serve as a model for international law and regulation from 1648 to 1945; some contend that it still holds now.

Today, even the most ardent advocates of globalization theory find it almost impossible to break free of the international relations structures imposed by the network of sovereign states. For better or for worse, the nation-state and its complex of Enlightenment ideas provide one of the foundation stones for twentieth-century globalization.

These ideas lay behind the traumatic sense of awakening Chinese intellectuals experienced from the late nineteenth century onward regarding the global order and China’s place therein. Before the incursions by the West, Chinese understanding of the world order had been shaped by sinocentric ideas that went back to the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). According to the Han five-zone (wu fu) theory, the known world had been divided into five concentric zones since the time of the mythical Xia dynasty (c. second millennium BC): the Chinese king directly ruled the inner three, while the outer two were occupied by barbarians. The world, in other words, revolved around China. The barbarian zones were tied to the Chinese center by a system of tributary relations; inhabitants of all five zones owed tribute to the center, thus affirming their status as dependent vassals. The reality of imperial China’s foreign relations was very different from this ideal: between the Han and Qing dynasties, part and sometimes all of China was repeatedly conquered by tribes from the northern steppe; the last of these conquering tribes founded Qing rule in 1644. Nevertheless, the idea that China occupied the center of the world retained a hold on the Chinese imagination until its gradual erosion following the introduction of the treaty port system in the mid-nineteenth century.

For a substantial part of the period from Han to Qing, China was not wholly
unjustified in its politico-cultural self-confidence. Long the dominant culture in the East Asia region, China was arguably one of the most powerful nations in the world during the Ming and early Qing dynasties (c. fifteenth to eighteenth centuries).

In the *longue durée* of Chinese history, however, the impact of Western aggression in the mid-nineteenth century represents a highly significant, albeit relatively recent and still short-term, rupture of self-confidence that finally forced the Chinese government by the start of the following century to abandon its sinocentric approach to foreign relations and deal with the “barbarians” as powerful and vigorous diplomatic equals, rather than as tributary vassals. “It was the contraction of China from a world to a nation in the world,” wrote Joseph Levenson, “that changed the Chinese historical consciousness.” The intellectual and journalist Liang Qichao (1873–1929) can thus be defined as the mind of modern China, the paradigmatic thinker who visualized China’s place in a new world order of modern nation-states. Liang was one of the first to tackle discursively the perceived need for a completely different kind of subjectivity — modern nationalism — after becoming aware of the existence of five continents and many flourishing nations beyond the Middle Kingdom. For Liang, nationalism signified modernity “not only because it explains the arrival of the modern world in terms of national revolution and collective progress but also because nationalist discourse mandates a new spatiotemporal regime.” In Liang’s understanding, the modern world was made up of individual nations; global modernity, defined as a world historical moment, could thus only be induced by nationalism as an ideology for change. It was this sense of the modern world, of the “great stage” of national and world history on which China suddenly found itself, that threw old-style Confucian universalism into a provincial and complacent light.

Such an analysis of Chinese modernity privileges a very particular form of modern consciousness, namely nation building stimulated by contact with the imperialist West. It is important, however, not to revert to the kind of viewpoint that for decades trapped understanding of Chinese modernity within the nationalistic, revolutionary boundaries of May Fourth and Communist historiography, that considered the story of Chinese modernity to be one of national liberation from semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism. From its beginnings, the Chinese modernizing project has encompassed multiple aims: to make China rich and powerful (*fuqiang*), to achieve female emancipation, establish a modern autonomous aesthetic, and so on. Scholarship of the last decade has determinedly challenged the May Fourth account of Chinese modernity. Rey Chow and David Der-wei Wang have turned the old revolutionary May Fourth and Communist paradigms of modernity on their heads, showing
the Westernized and reformist May Fourth thought to have been traditional and reactionary. At the same time, they have identified a state of immanent modernity in the decadence of more traditional Chinese literary forms under pressure from external stimuli, such as the new popular public sphere that took shape in the treaty ports in the late Qing and early decades of the twentieth century. Leo Lee’s consideration of the early twentieth-century “Shanghai Modern” through consumer and print culture, cinema, and literature points to the virtual absence of terms generally associated with Marxist nation-building models of modernity in his subject material. Yet a significant common point emerges from these various models: nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chinese modernity was a product of the intersection of international, including imperialist, cultures with Chinese society. A combination of historical, cultural, and political factors within China then ensured that the political goal of nation building would become the dominate mode of modern intellectual consciousness and underlie many of the concomitant goals of modernization.

Perry Link has written of three traditional assumptions underlying the stance of modern Chinese writers: that written Chinese embodies moral and political power, that a literary intellectual has a responsibility to help set the world in order, and that he can reasonably expect the state to make use of his talents. The nation-building schemas pioneered by intellectuals such as Yan Fu (1854–1921) and Liang Qichao rendered more explicit these links between state and (literary) intellectuals, and brought them closer in the era of modern nationalism. Influenced by examples from the West and Japan, Liang concluded that the “development of science, material well-being, liberal democratic polities, and modern national power was the universal process of the contemporary world.” The principle that through literature the Chinese people, as citizens of the Chinese nation, could be co-opted and cultivated lay at the base of the modern Chinese intellectual and literary manifesto. Both Liang and Yan seized upon vernacular literature, and fiction in particular, as the key to national salvation, on the grounds of its broad popularity and their perception of the role it had played in strengthening national consciousness in the West and Japan.

The development of these ideas through the May Fourth period and beyond is described in Fitzgerald’s account of China’s national awakening during the first four decades of the twentieth century. Examining diverse cultural forms, including fiction, fashion, architecture, autobiography, ethics, ethnography, literature, journalism, and history, Fitzgerald conveys the range and power of nationalist discourse across all spheres of intellectual activity. He traces the process by which individual awakening turned into a new collective national consciousness and describes the impulse of “awakened” twentieth-
century intellectuals to awaken others — the “marriage of ethics and action.” Fitzgerald notes no significant qualitative difference in the calls to collective action of Sun Yat-sen and the Nationalists (Guomindang, GMD), and Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In the 1930s and 1940s, intellectual preoccupations with the nation on both the Left and Right crystallized into the high political demands made of writers by both Mao and the GMD.

Yet even as the discourse of national, and hence international, modernity and transformation took hold in China, its intellectual proponents were quick to note the contradictions it contained. Chinese nation building was stimulated by consciousness of a larger global whole and by the desire to gain membership in this community through the passport of nationhood. If one of the primary tasks faced by Chinese intellectuals in the twentieth century was that of establishing, in the face of imperialism, a national literature, the desire to pursue that end was at the same time “a desire for a kind of universal justice — a justice in the eyes of which Chinese literature and culture would become legitimate internationally rather than simply ‘Chinese’.” Nationalism and universality are almost always two sides of the same coin in twentieth-century China, from Liang Qichao to Mao Zedong and beyond. Liu Kang, for example, characterizes Mao, the inventor of sinicized Marxism, as “a universalist or internationalist in his revolutionary utopian aspirations . . . nationalism, as a strategy in his revolutionary schema, is always subjugated to Mao’s overall vision of the ‘emancipation of all mankind.’” Yet Liang Qichao’s original vision of Chinese identity as one national culture among many in the global network immediately created a logical dilemma: “The same moment the modern world space makes possible a universal human history, the geopolitical reality exploited by the system of nation-states also keeps that prospect at bay.” Moreover, what kind of “universal justice” has after all been delivered by the value systems of modernity and progress in which Chinese intellectuals have invested so much hope?

Despite the heavy emphasis on awakening Chinese national consciousness in modern China, and despite the local and universal claims of nationalism, a deep ideologically ambivalent vein of Western-based imperialism runs within discourses of modern nation building in China and other countries outside the developed West: nationalism, the instrumental logic behind Western imperialist domination and racism, is reproduced under leaders of national liberation movements such as Mao. This propagates a global model of nationalism intertwined with imperialism, a second-hand modernity that never quite delivers the liberating universalism it promises. Bin Zhao expresses the derivative nature of the struggle thus:
Ever since the idea of progress, invented some 250 years ago in a cold corner of Western Europe, conquered the imagination of the rest of the world through violence and enticement, the frenzied pursuit of modernization has become a central concern for the so-called “Third World.” Modernity, the most formidable achievement of the West, questioned and criticized at home since its inception, remains a potent dreamland for the rest of the world. The vision of many cultural and political elites in poor countries has been so dazzled by its powerful display that their imagination of other possibilities for development has been seriously blunted. . . . The history of desperately seeking modernity has been littered with sufferings, failures, frustrations, and disasters.  

Although Bin Zhao here is discussing “modernization,” the term “nation building” — a key ingredient in the Western European recipe for progress over the past 250 years — could be substituted equally well. China, represented by its intellectual elite, has turned out to be one of the twentieth century’s most determined aspirants to this understanding of progress. Yet if the general idea of progress is split into two concepts, modernization (such as institutional reforms, and economic and technological development) and modernity (a form of consciousness), we can identify one feature that has repeatedly frustrated Chinese efforts. While modernization is linked to material developments such as science, capitalism, and the like, modernity (an abstract outlook) is rooted in the ideas of progress, movement, unrepeatable time, innovation and originality. Modernity demands a new kind of subjectivity, one that can cope with the influx of new influences brought by the modern era and a new envisioning of the global spatiotemporal realm. This emphasis on novelty implies that, having embarked on modernity, there is no turning back, but only a ceaseless pursuit of renewal and change.  

Until very recently, the dominant cultural and historical geography of modernity has insisted that the initiative in this process lies with the West, leaving those outside doomed to a perpetual game of catch-up. Such assumptions have long formed the problematic basis of China’s attempts to join the global structures that symbolize success in the modern world.  

Its pretensions to universal emancipation notwithstanding, nationalism, as it has spread throughout the modern world, has been deeply implicated in this game of catch-up. Indeed, scholars have often adopted a domino-effect analytical model to describe nationalism’s advance. Greenfeld, for example, traces the process by which nationalism spread from England, to France, Russia, the United States, and Germany, driven by the ressentiment, or the competitive desire of national elites for the sense of uniqueness and prestige generated by consciousness of national identity. When the creeds of modernization and
nationalism spread beyond the West, there was an altogether more powerful propagating force at work — namely, imperialism — equipped with its full arsenal of modern Western reason, science, and capital. The mode of historical thinking tied to Enlightenment reason, in turn, has had a bearing on all kinds of social, political, and cultural production, particularly in East Asian societies, which, in Prasenjit Duara’s view, have adopted the Enlightenment model of history perhaps more wholly than other non-Western societies.

The last two centuries have established [Enlightenment] History as we know it — a linear, progressive history — not only as the dominant mode of experiencing time, but as the dominant mode of being. That is to say, time overcomes space — a condition in which the Other in geographical space will, in time, come to look like earlier versions of us . . . History enables not simply the justification of world mastery by the West, but . . . the appropriation of the Other as a form of knowledge.43

This sets down the hierarchy that governs the rhetoric of much political and cultural interaction between the developed and developing world in the modern era and provides the philosophical background to the phenomenon that Edward Said calls Orientalism. In Orientalist discourse, Orientals by themselves lack the requisite objective reasoning abilities to survive in the Western vision of the world order.44 This phenomenon is neatly captured by Partha Chatterjee’s term for nationalist thought in the colonial world — “a derivative discourse.”45 Chatterjee raises an acute objection even to Benedict Anderson’s approach, which theorizes the spread of imagined national communities made possible by the growth of vernacular literatures. “If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain ‘modular’ forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity . . . even our imaginations must remain forever colonized.”46

The cultural implications of this point, directly relevant to Chinese intellectuals’ desire for the Nobel Prize as part of their desire for modernity, have been probed by Gregory Jusdanis in Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture, in which he describes the efforts of Greek elites to catch up with more advanced European nations in their quest for modernity.47 Jusdanis makes the observation, highly pertinent to the close links between modernity, nation, and literature in China, that the tensions created by the opposition of Greek tradition with Western modernity were resolved by the modern construct of the autonomous aesthetic. His discussion of the institutions of this autonomous “aesthetic” — literary criticism, canon making, and so on — highlights
the process by which it has been established as a powerful, independent system of symbolic values (arbitrated by organizations such as the Nobel Committee) that represents nationhood and hence functions as a passport to membership of the modern global whole. These Enlightenment–Romantic discourses of nation building — the belief that the world is made up of nations, each comprised of creative individuals who belong to and reflect a unique national culture — have had enormous influence on modern understandings of how a universalistic autonomous aesthetic is constituted. However, as Pierre Bourdieu’s work suggests, although modern ideas of art define it as an independent value system, this claim conceals and implicitly denies the concepts of nationality, class, and gender that inevitably shape this process.

The persuasive superiority of Western enlightenment, progress, and science was widely embraced by Chinese reformers, to whom it promised national empowerment even as it took away discursive control. Addressing the question of the national character and national emancipation, modern Chinese writers such as Ba Jin and Shen Congwen could not but engage with, and thus reinforce with varying degrees of reflective self-consciousness, the very Orientalist critiques they sought to refute. Anxiety about the Nobel Prize, as an external and specifically Western source of valuation, expresses the ambivalence of Chinese intellectuals concerning their relation to the global order and to the basis of membership to the global whole, nationhood, as mediated by the autonomous aesthetic and the institutionalization of a national literature. The establishment of a national literary criticism in twentieth-century China provided a discursive tool by which literary intellectuals could theoretically work out relations with international and national communities, but more often than not these efforts foundered on deeply politicized contention over who constituted and represented these communities.

A useful theoretical perspective on the troubled psychology behind intellectual nation-building discourses in China is provided by Xueping Zhong’s work on the modern Chinese intellectual “marginality complex.” In her analysis of masculinity in the modern Chinese literary identity, Zhong asserts that Chinese cultural and literary politics of the twentieth century and in particular of the post-Mao era, can be read in terms of a beleaguered (male) subjectivity. The modern Chinese encounter with the West produced an intellectual identity that struggled to detach itself from tradition while desiring to catch up with and win recognition from the West, the source of “universal modernity.” Feelings of inferiority deriving from the historical encounter between Chinese tradition and the West engendered both a sense of rootless marginality (a “male marginality complex”) and — the kickback from patri-
archalism and sinocentrism — a desire to recover a central (read modern, national, global, universal) position. “Instead of embracing the marginality . . . the Chinese male marginality complex is filled with the desire to overcome the marginalized position by moving toward the center” and ultimately supporting the center.52

This, however, is the search for a center that is not fixed or even attainable, given the two-way pull between marginal and central aspirations, between nationalistic pride and global ambitions. Intellectuals both yearn for what they see as rightful recognition and suspect that things Chinese will never quite reach the imagined global standard.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that the Nobel Literature Prize is given to individuals and not nations, a fact often obscured in China’s Nobel discussions. The Chinese identification of literature with national prestige in the international arena (signified by the Nobel Complex) has proved continually troublesome. It in effect holds literature — an elite form in which the role of the creative individual is nowadays paramount — ransom to a collective, centralized national identity. Yet although Chinese intellectuals have brought the particularities of their own local experience to bear on the problem of modern national identity and literature, the self-contradictory notion of a universal literary (and civilizational) system constituted by individual geniuses representative of their national cultures is not unique to China; similar convictions have been held, and indeed originated, in the modern West.

Chinese preoccupation with a powerful cultural institution such as the Nobel Prize is part of the uncomfortable play-off in the modern era between China, the West, and the quest for universality. If desire for the prize is equivalent to the Chinese yearning to represent China on a global, Western-dominated stage, it is deeply enmeshed in these century-old discourses of inferiority and insecurity. The struggles to reclaim and represent the nation in the twentieth century, struggles in which literature has often been at the center, testify to the hold these discourses have taken on the Chinese intellectual imagination. The hope that literature can carry Chinese aspirations forward demonstrates the faith in modern China, as in Greece, that the autonomous aesthetic can effectively resolve tensions between West and East, modernity and tradition, the nation and the world. However, the often tumultuous and heavily politicized workings of this aesthetic and of the search for a Nobel Prize in twentieth-century China also point to real-world imbalances and inequalities that belie the universalistic promise of national and world literatures.
Post-Second World War Globalization and the Nation-State

Although nationhood over the last fifty-odd years has largely continued to be the key to membership in the modern international order, the relationship between the nation and the process of globalization has not remained static and currently forms the crux of debates on global transactions at the start of the new millennium. The second half of the twentieth century appears to have been the golden age of the nation-state, and hence, theoretically, of the Western-dominated model of modernity that has long been viewed as lying behind the nation-state: the number of internationally recognized states more than doubled between 1945 and the early 1990s, and the importance of interstate relations to the contemporary global order was formally institutionalized with the establishment of the United Nations in 1945.

At the same time, however, the growth of multinational organizations and transnational flows of capital, information, people, and culture has meant that politics, economics, and culture in the majority of nation-states (barring anomalies such as North Korea) have become increasingly subject to forces and influences from the outside that exhibit little respect for national sovereignty. Since the fall of the Soviet bloc in 1989 and the accelerated advancement of market forces within the People's Republic of China in the 1990s, socialism no longer presents an alternative to global capitalism; indeed, it has been almost totally discredited. Martin Jacques characterizes the 1990s ethos as that of “neutral, interest-free globalization,” consigning “the past to the dustbin of history—ideology, left, right, socialism, capitalism, imperialism (hopelessly old hat) and the rest.” Although this decade saw the emergence of the United States as a global hyperpower, remarks Jacques, the U.S. strove “to construct a global alliance, its multilateralist instincts still predominant,” rather than unilaterally asserting its national interests.53 Even after the radical change in global politics brought about by September 11, 2001, when the Americans became increasingly willful in their interventions on the international stage, scholarly analysts of the globalization debate have continued to position themselves somewhere in or between two extreme camps: skeptics, who believe that the sovereign nation-state remains the crucial unit in the organization of the world; and believers in globalization, who see instead one world, shaped by extensive, intensive, and rapid flows across regions and between continents.54

Few hard-and-fast conclusions can be drawn from this debate, beyond the fact that since the 1960s globalization has emerged as a respectable analytic term. This is not to say that scholars of globalization such as David Held and Anthony McGrew are agnostic about its contemporary practice, or view it as
heralding the emergence of a truly inclusive, egalitarian global system. Joining their voices with those of the swelling worldwide ranks of antiglobalization protestors, they point out that, given the accelerating gap between rich and poor nations, globalization poses significant questions about the kind of world order being constructed and whose interests it serves. The principal beneficiary, indeed the architect of an open global realm, is still capital; those who enjoy and gain most benefit from capital and the political and cultural influence it generates are, of course, those who hold most of it, namely the developed nations of the West. Yet scholars such as Arjun Appadurai counter claims that globalization is synonymous with Western economic, political, and cultural imperialism by asserting that global flows occur in and through growing disjunctures between different spheres of global activity. The question of agency (contested between consumers and producers), argues Appadurai, is now thoroughly confused, and globalization exists in tension between homogenization and heterogenization.

Appadurai’s emphasis on the blurring of agency and on processes of decentering and pluralism in the global arena indicates that there is some overlap between theories of globalization on the one hand, and postcolonial and postmodernist theory (the former term current by the 1980s, the latter a decade earlier) on the other. If so, the age of globalization should herald the death of Enlightenment thought. Starting with Orientalism in 1978, the Eurocentrism of Enlightenment-derived schemas of knowledge has endured an uncomfortable two decades in academia. Said laid bare the Occidental construction of the Orient, likening Western knowledge of the East to subordination by a strong, knowing West of the weak, knowable, and therefore controllable East. Nationalism, another Enlightenment model, has also slipped out of fashion, replaced by the postmodern free-for-all of global capitalism. Indeed, even though the nation-state remains the chief unit of political organization in the world today, new globalizing orthodoxies assert the world is ruled instead by neutral flows of transnational capital, arbitrated by transnational corporations. The idea of the nation has thus become a little passé, even distasteful to those in the West who have moved on (postcolonial intellectuals included). As non-Western peoples and regimes gained access to the special formula of nationalist liberation (membership in the United Nations grew from 51 at its founding in 1945, to 156 in 1981, the new members largely third-world states released from crumbling empires), the West was tiring of it. By the 1970s, writes Chatterjee, the West started to view the nation as a slightly embarrassing export, as “the reason why people in the Third World killed each other. . . Nothing, it would seem, was left in the legacy of nationalism to make people in the Western world feel good about it.”
Admittedly, nationalism has made quite a comeback in the West in the twenty-first century, particularly in the United States, which has abandoned the multilateralism of the Cold War and the 1990s in favor of a unilateral, or at best bilateral (with Britain) course of action in international relations. But in the world of cultural studies, the advent of globalization in the 1960s has made the search for a more evenly weighted, less Western-focused understanding of global transactions a continuing and major concern. Tainted by cultural imperialism, nationalism and the other companion concepts of Enlightenment modernity have in Western academic circles been superseded by the epistemic developments associated with postmodern and postcolonial theory, two flagships of global multiculturalism. While both these terms encompass a broad range of theories and theorists, academic postcolonial criticism shares with postmodernist theory and culture the aim of contesting master narratives: Eurocentrism, Orientalism, and nationalism, “those modes of thinking which configure the Third World in such irreducible essences as religiosity, underdevelopment, poverty, nationhood, non-Westernness.”58 Manifestations of culture and criticism labeled “postmodern,” similarly aim to accept and represent with relativistic inclusiveness all classes and races in rebellion against the suffocating embrace of European modernity.59

Both postmodernism and postcolonialism thus seek a cultivated indeterminacy that has spread into all spheres of thought: philosophy, science, history, literature, and cultural criticism. The very porosity of national boundaries (former markers of the modern) seems to be the hallmark of our globalized contemporary era. Already the victory of decentered, genuinely universalistic plurality over earlier, Western-dominated models of global modernity has been celebrated: for instance, in Frederick Buell’s *National Culture and the New Global System*. This work, endorsed by the prominent theorist of postmodernism Fredric Jameson, takes an overall optimistic view of the interaction between national and global culture, questioning both the ability of the West to impose unmediated cultural imperialism over distant corners of the globe and the authenticity of local “traditions.”60 Buell traces the historical process behind the contemporary ideal of indeterminate globalization, from the formation of the global network of nations, via the Three Worlds system, to the decentered single system that developed over the two decades before the early 1990s. In short, he finds at work a “fruitful paradox” in which, “as the world draws more tightly together into a single system, it multiplies its circulation of differences.”61 He denies the existence of any one center: the shifting and overlapping of agency permits none. As the ultimate gesture of postmodern magnanimity, he even offers an oblique thanks to Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803), Enlightenment theorizer *par excellence* of the nation, for
the latter’s attachment to referential cultural boundaries that could later be so easily attacked as a sociocultural construction rather than supported by objective social science. This echoes the conviction of the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha that the nation is no more than a notion.

So much, it seems, for Enlightenment thinking and nationalism in the postcolonial era of globalization. What is the significance of this newly inclusive, multicultural universalism for those non-Western countries, such as China, that found themselves forever lagging behind in the race for global modernity as defined by this same Enlightenment thinking and nationalism? Thoughtful critics are not convinced by claims of victory for a decentered, universalistic multiculturalism. Although the binary views of the West and its Other seem “already to have been erased by the global condition of modernity,” Daruvala writes, “this does not solve the issue at all . . . since the idea of a global (post)modernity — which is often seen as leading to the supercession of the nation-state — is still deeply indebted to the Enlightenment mode of history. Postmodernity and modernity are conjoined, in that both are posited on a rupture with the past. More suspiciously, capitalism is still the beneficiary of whatever changes may have taken place.” These are points that Buell acknowledges but does not allow to seriously qualify his celebratory account of globalization. To back up his conclusions, he approvingly quotes a satire on anti-immigrant American chauvinism that meticulously chronicles the non-American origin of practically every component of the daily American routine: clothing, mirrors, coffee, sugar, china, and so on. Yet he overlooks one crucial element of the power play involved: the “Hundred Percent American” is the consumer and primary beneficiary of all these exotically derived everyday commodities.

Arif Dirlik and Ziauddin Sardar have taken issue with the multiculturalist triumphalism of postcolonialism and postmodernism. In provocative and stimulating critiques, both view, to varying degrees, these “post-isms” as creating an indeterminate mishmash that undermines rigorous, constructive academic debate while duplicitously strengthening Western-derived value systems and continuing to marginalize the non-West. Dirlik’s reservations concerning postcolonialism are on four general counts. Firstly, postcolonialism, with its emphasis on local subjectivities, denies and erases real global historical phenomena such as the spread of capital, which are related to complex networks of Eurocentrism that survive up to the present day (in the form, for example, of Western economic dominance). Secondly, the subversive potential of postcolonialism has been, and always will be, limited by the fact that it issues from intellectuals of third-world origin located in the centers of power, producing, arguably, an equation between multiculturalism and postcolonial Eurocen-
trism. Thirdly, the ritualized attacks on the Enlightenment in the name of postcolonialism suppress the complexities of the historical Enlightenment, in its time a source of new critiques of oppression and exploitation within and without Europe. Finally, postcolonialism takes aim at universalist Enlightenment modes of thinking while itself being a product of globalization and a new universal vision for global cultural relations; even a multiculturalist critic such as Buell acknowledges resonance between his project and Enlightenment aspirations clearly enough: “Vastly more than eighteenth-century concepts of universal citizenship,” Buell writes of multiculturalism, “these developments represent an attempt to form a global civil culture.” Multiculturalism has thus become the new universalistic dogma: “Be hybrid, or die!”

Taking the ethics of marginality (recentering of non-Western “Other worlds”) as a crucial underpinning of postmodernism, Sardar concludes that “far from being a new theory of liberation,

postmodernism, particularly from the perspective of the Other, the non-western cultures, is simply a new wave of domination riding on the crest of colonialism and modernity . . . postmodernism avoids, by glossing over, the politics of non-western marginalization in history by suddenly discovering Otherness everywhere. . . . We are all Others now, can appropriate the Other, consume artefacts of the Other, so what does it matter if Others want something different in their future.

Rather than merely repudiating colonialism and modernity, postmodernism instead soars far above them both: “Postmodernism is about appropriating the history and identity of non-western cultures as an integral facet of itself, colonizing their future and occupying their being.” The world of postmodernism is still being made by the nations of the West, with the mendacious assurance that it is tolerantly, inclusively internationalist. Sardar’s array of examples ranges from Disney’s historicist “edutainment” to The Body Shop’s one-way, parasitic sampling of indigenous exotica for the benefit of Western consumers.

Of relevance to the present study’s focus on literature is Sardar’s reservation of some of his most passionate criticisms for the phenomenon of postmodern fiction such as magical realism, the genre by which non-Western authors have managed, it seems, most successfully to gain entrance on their own terms to the contemporary world canon. Magical realism, he asserts, was already present in Kafka (1883–1924), Beckett (1906–1989), and Kipling (1865–1936); its boom in the non-West “gives the appearance of speaking from the perspective that incorporates the Other but in so doing it merely utilizes that conception of the Other that fits within the established conventions of the west.”

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idealized culture of liberal democracy, acclaimed by postmodernists as the only culture in which a desirable plurality can function, while declaring the indefensibility of all values, is in fact declaring the defensibility of two ideologies, capitalism and democracy. Everything else, however, can and should be ironized and mocked. Sardar’s locus classicus here is Salman Rushdie’s (1947–) celebration of postmodern secularism and demonization of faith, *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie’s book, Sardar asserts, represents the capitulation of a non-Western author to the logic of the West. Rushdie, like authors of Latin American magical realism, writes in European languages, and therefore chooses to operate within a recognizably Western linguistic and literary tradition. Rather than even-handedly representing values of pluralistic tolerance, Rushdie uses the economic might of a powerful Western publishing house to promote the Western orthodoxy of secular art. More than simply privileging the voice of secularism over others, Rushdie’s fiction claims the position of god and becomes an arch ideology of Western art.

It is significant that, once more, suspiciously in common with Enlightenment modernity and nationalism, the idea of the autonomous aesthetic (in the form of Western secular art) aspires to play a powerful emancipatory role within the universalistic schema of postmodernism. Yet, as before, its claims to autonomy require scrutiny. In face of the triumph of Western secular art, other cultures find their own distinct voices severely muffled, and subject to an agenda determined by the secular imagination. Pluralism is being simulated, while the underlying structures of dominance (America, the West) continue to rule.

Both Dirlik’s reservations about postcolonial theory and Sardar’s attack on postmodernism are far from the last word on either subject. Dirlik is ungenerous in assessing the contribution made by postcolonial theory to creating a less Western-centric scholarly framework of analysis (a framework to which the present study is itself heavily indebted). In his anxiety to denounce what he sees as the manifestations of postmodernism in contemporary global culture, Sardar neglects to engage in a careful way with the critical and oppositional possibilities inherent within analyses by postmodern critics such as Fredric Jameson. Sardar refuses also to consider the subversive tendencies of the postmodern aesthetic, for example its parodic potential and its ability to combine ironic distance from, and complicity with, mainstream culture and society. But both Dirlik’s and Sardar’s criticisms provide bracing insights into the workings of a contemporary global culture that, while lauding the values of multicultural universalism, continues to be dominated by the economic might of the West, a dominance that has so far been only slowly and partially challenged by the rise of alternative power centers in Asia (Japan’s now falter-
ing economic miracle, and the considerable but far from even growth achieved in Mainland China since the 1980s). Less polemical arguments about the failings of “post” theories have, moreover, been advanced by scholars such as Leela Gandhi, Rey Chow, and Ien Ang. Gandhi and Chow rightly applaud the pluralistic, oppositional achievements within the Western humanities associated with developments in postmodernist and postcolonial theory, including poststructuralism, cultural studies, and *Orientalism*-inspired critiques. Yet at the same time, they express strong caution about premature multiculturalist triumphalism. While the broad schools of postmodernist and postcolonial theory certainly open the door to multiculturalism, they have not yet erased certain key power relations within global culture and within Western academe: for example, the problem of postcolonial, multicultural theory being rooted in the West and the danger that exists for postcolonial or subaltern studies of collapsing into “identity politics” that reaffirm the old-style essentializations of imperialist nationalism. In *On Not Speaking Chinese*, meanwhile, Ien Ang argues convincingly about the failure of “identity” and “diaspora” politics to erode nationalism and racism.

These reservations about the ability of postcolonialism and postmodernism to globalize and eradicate enduring forms of Western-centrism and nationalist bias in cultural transactions are borne out by noting the selective application of these theories in China between the late 1980s and early 1990s. Postmodernism first seized Chinese intellectual imaginations in 1985, following a series of lectures given by Fredric Jameson in Beijing. After 1989 the ever-more-visible manifestations of globalization, combined with disillusionment over the failure of Westernized ideals of enlightenment and progress of the 1980s, resulted in an even more enthusiastic embrace of postmodernism and postcolonialism as models for understanding China’s situation. Critics in the West such as Dirlik and Xudong Zhang have also seized upon postmodernism as a new, fruitful way of envisioning contemporary Chinese cultural identities, moving beyond “the increasingly problematic status of the nation as a unit of analysis, as it is undermined by forces from both within and without.” Dirlik and Zhang hold that China’s incorporation into the global economy, and the growing influence and prosperity of the Chinese global diaspora, dictate a rethinking of modernist notions of a unified and unquestioned Chinese identity put forward by the socialist state. Within Mainland China alone, uneven development and the dislocation between a socialist system in apparent meltdown and capitalism with global characteristics suggest the need to question the possibility of any coherent teleological narrative.

The 1994 manifesto of “post-studies” (*houxue*), “From Modernity to Chineseness,” coauthored by Zhang Fa, Zhang Yiwu, and Wang Yichuan, sought

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a postmodern, postcolonial model for understanding China’s experiences of the modern. Its authors defined modernity as an exclusively Western, hegemonic model of knowledge to be abandoned in the 1990s in favor of a new Chinese vision. The manifesto, in short, aspired to fulfill an emancipatory function — unlocking China from the relations of domination inherent to the Western notion of modern progress by unleashing the powerful theoretical forces of postmodernism and postcolonialism. Rather than distancing themselves from the idea of nation as an inseparable component of Western Enlightenment modernity, however, these theorists seemed to reassert essentialized national characteristics.

Ever since postmodernist theory arrived in China, cultural critics have pointed out the nationalist uses to which it has been put. Jing Wang scornfully characterizes the earliest manifestations of the postmodernism debate as permeated by the “Great Leap Forward” mentality, namely, an Enlightenment-like desire for cultural progress, for China to stride to the forefront of civilizational developments. After the Maoist model of nationalism and universalism had been discredited, Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s first introduced a Western-oriented notion of modernity. The rapid succession of literary and cultural imports was driven by the familiar intellectual desire for Chinese culture to modernize, catch up, and “march towards the (center of the literary) world” (zou xiang shijie); the desire to capture a Nobel Prize slotted naturally into this schema. But the enthusiastic reception of these imports was always mediated by anxious cultural nationalism and by ambivalence concerning their non-Chinese origins. Postmodernism, however, the most up-to-date intellectual trend to enter China in the 1980s, offered the bonus feature of combining a new and inclusive global vision with privileging the local over some dominant center. Thus the attraction of postmodernism in the 1980s, Jing Wang maintains, lay in its pliability to the ends of cultural nationalism, in its promise to help shape and legitimize a sinified vision of global (post)modernity. Even critics such as Dirlik and Zhang, who have endorsed the use of “postmodernism” in the Chinese context, note the irony: “While the ultimate justification for the use of the term may lie in spatial fracturing and temporal dissonance, which call into question any claims to cultural authenticity, Chinese postmodernists insist nevertheless on marking Chinese postmodernity as something authentically Chinese.”

Critics such as Ben Xu and Henry Yiheng Zhao, both now resident in the West, have reached even more profoundly critical conclusions concerning the functioning of postmodernist and postcolonial theory in 1990s China. While following the postcolonial and postmodernist privileging of local “marginal” subjectivities, they assert, Chinese cultural nativist theory has devel-
oped along with a growing intellectual nationalism that focuses resentment at past humiliations and failures onto attacks on the West. This is, moreover, a stance welcomed by the post-1989 government interested in encouraging an antiforeign nationalism to secure its claims to legitimacy. Xu notes inconsistencies in the postmodernist, postcolonial standpoints that indicate nothing less than a recapitulation of Chinese cultural nationalism and all the problems and sources of ambivalence that have dogged China’s quest for the modern. China’s “post-ist” scholars repudiate Western-derived ideas of progress, while presenting modern Chinese culture in teleological terms, progressing inexorably towards the postmodern emancipation of a Post-New Era, “a self-congratulatory process of national maturing that purposefully leaves out any possible historical reverse.” While thumbing a postmodernist nose at their Western-based targets, these critics themselves pose as absolute arbiters of truth, upholding the virtue of a mystically unique notion of “Chineseness” (comprising Chinese-style market economy, Chinese popular culture, and Chinese diversified values). Rather than decentered concepts open to redefinition, modernity and Chineseness become fixed entities, with the idea of “China” firmly reinstalled at the center of Chinese culture. Cultural nativists, Xu has little doubt, “rally under the banner of nation.” And, of course, the fact remains that these theories being used to criticize the West still originated in the West.

Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose: under the mantle of postmodernist and postcolonial theory, Enlightenment ideas of the modern have, at least in part, continued to color new, inclusive schemas of global culture and the “local” (marginal) milieus they are meant to privilege. China’s ressentiment for modernity has lived on.

Chinese Literature and the World Literary Economy

The evolution of global modernity in the twentieth century has set in place epistemological and aesthetic frameworks that base agency and power in the West, despite the leveling aspirations of contemporary theoretical and cultural developments. This state of affairs is played out in the world of literary production as it is in the worlds of economics and politics. Once more, agency for inventing universal cultural models has lain within the West, in the hands of theorists and architects such as Goethe (1749–1832), Marx (1818–1883), and Alfred Nobel (1833–1896), who have tended to overlook or perpetuate various forms of Eurocentrism.

Goethe’s 1827 schema for a world literary marketplace, based on principles of free trade (an antecedent of global capitalism) that would advance human
civilization through mutual understanding and tolerance, is very much a philosophical product of its time, revealing both Enlightenment universalism and Romantic faith in an artistic realm that is both made up of and floats above national difference. The realization of his ideal, however, was compromised both by the global system of transnational exchange governed by economic inequalities, and by a barely concealed Euro- and Germanic-centrism. Marx, who linked the spread of literature across national boundaries with the invasive, exploitative spread of capital, nevertheless also took a positive view of the universalistic potential of this development. “National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.” The power of Swedish capital accounts at least in part for the global authority of the Nobel Prize. A hierarchy of Western power and economics governs world literature and the Nobel Prize, the latter representing “a systemic designation of literary authority that rightly or wrongly has been established and accepted by the economically advanced Western nations; the rest of the world ignores it only at the peril of exclusion from this source of wealth and power.” The very idea of a prize surely contradicts Goethe’s ideal: a truly universalistic world literature would not require arbitration by the possessors of wealth and power, but concentrate purely on global free-flows of literary translation and exchange.

The Nobel Prize occupies a very particular position in the global imagination as a unique institution of world literature (it is virtually the only international literary prize, certainly the most famous and lucrative). Yet the Nobel Prize is also very much a product of modern European philosophy, combining contradictory ideas about literature from the Enlightenment, the Romantic era, and the nineteenth century. In practice, the prize has not been a clearly centered or static institution, having veered confusingly between different criteria (shaped by the personal preferences of the committee members and unacknowledged Western systems of literary evaluation) in different epochs, including a Goethean “coolness of plasticity,” universal accessibility, engaged writing, pioneering experimentalism, anticommunalism and ethnic marginalia. It is neither a bastion of “pure” literary values nor a consistent arbitrator among literary styles and nations: its criteria have moved from artistic universalism to national characteristics depending on whether the laureate is Western or non-Western, from the “description of the human condition” to the nationally specific “spokesman for Arabic prose” (citations for 1985 and 1987, Claude Simon, France, and Naguib Mahfouz, Egypt, respectively).

The multiculturalist record of the Nobel Prize speaks for itself. In its first one hundred years, the prize went to only six (black) African or Asian laureates (Rabindranath Tagore, Yasunari Kawabata, Wole Soyinka, Naguib Mah-
fouz, Kenzaburo Oe, Gao Xingjian), two of whom (Tagore and Soyinka) won the prize principally for works written in English. Four of these prizes, however, have been concentrated in the last twenty years, from which it could be inferred that the Nobel Committee has shifted its attention towards universality. In the period following the Second World War, Nobel committees have increasingly singled out “difficult” oeuvres that claim artistic universality and autonomy through their obscurity, floating above the realm of national sociopolitical specificity. Since the 1970s committees have also sought to honor writers from “marginal” literatures. More women have received the prize and the committee has sought to break away from Nobel’s worthy stipulation of “idealism,” honoring instead avant-garde jokers and skeptics like Dario Fo (1997) and Gao Xingjian. What are the implications of this trend for the reception of a “marginal” national literature such as China’s within a world literary economy — the contemporary heir to Goethe’s ideal of World Literature — in transition from the modern to the postmodern?

Even as China aims at the start of a new millennium to take an ever-more-active part in “global culture,” and even as a Chinese-born writer whose most important work was written in Chinese has finally taken Nobel laurels, reception of Chinese literature is still caught up in tortuous aesthetic and ideological wrangles that illuminate the true dynamics of the world literary economy. Despite strenuous efforts on the part of Chinese politicians, critics, and writers, along with Western translators, Chinese literature has not achieved mainstream recognition in the global canon as defined by the publishing markets and literary institutions (such as organs of literary review, prizes, academic curricula) of the politically and culturally dominant West. Although translations from Chinese into Western languages have been on the increase since the death of Mao, relatively little Chinese literature is translated and published in English (only 181 book-length translations were produced between 1976 and 2002). The translations that do come out are rarely produced by prestigious commercial publishers able to afford generous publicity budgets. Translations are more often picked up by academic presses, ensuring that Chinese literature tends to remain in an academic ghetto. Where translations are produced by commercial literary publishers, these presses rarely devote the editorial resources necessary to achieve the stylistic standards expected in works written directly in English or translated from other languages. Works of Chinese literature in translation are seldom reviewed in mainstream arenas of literary criticism, such as the book pages of national broadsheet newspapers or review journals such as The New York Review of Books or The London Review of Books. Even the relative boom in translations since the death of Mao has “failed to generate either best-sellers or accepted points of reference in

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Western literary criticism.” Why is Chinese literature rarely, if ever, appreciated as literature in the West?

It is not the intention here to consider at length the question of whether modern China has produced literary works of sufficient quality to merit further Nobel Prizes or a more central position in the world canon. Such an approach would imply a faith in a universal standard of evaluation in world literature, and it is one of the aims of this book to demonstrate the fallacy of such a notion. True enough, the weaknesses in modern Chinese literature are sufficiently obvious even for specialists in the field to admit. A few of the principal criticisms can be summarized thus: the ruptures brought about by the literary revolutions ongoing since the start of the twentieth century have interrupted the maturation process of a modern literature; the intrusion of politics into the literary realm, particularly after 1949, has stifled literary creativity as Chinese writers, critics, and editors have not been able to withstand these incursions; in the 1990s, as overt politicization of literature has decreased, “serious” writers have been unable to resist new commercial temptations and have consequently neglected literary quality. Other commentators have pointed to the poor quality of translations as a factor contributing to the low popularity of Chinese literature in the West. “It is perfectly comprehensible that [Westerners] may choose not to read widely in modern Chinese literature, since the greater part of it lacks grace, wit and sensibility,” Bonnie McDougall asserts. “Even its natural audience in its native country would, in strict confidence, agree that it is a sad comedown from the glories of the Chinese literary tradition.”

Works of indifferent or even poor artistic quality have not, however, prevented a good many writers from winning a Nobel Prize. The list of awards is peppered with names that literary history has long forgotten: Sully Prudhomme, the first laureate, is a case in point. At present, moreover, several national literatures in the West probably possess as few writers of obviously Nobel stature as China does. In Britain, for example, it is hard to think of more than one or two potential Nobel laureates. Chinese literary history is, admittedly, strikingly barren between 1949 and the 1970s, but the pre- and post-Mao periods have undoubtedly produced works that could compare in terms of quality certainly with the worst and probably with a few of the best of Nobel-winning oeuvres; some of these have been skillfully translated into Western languages. Rather than arguing endlessly about the strengths and weaknesses of various literary works, this section instead seeks to root the relative marginality of such a large national literature as China’s within the world literary economy in the international politics of publishing, translation, and reception.

First of all, the term “world literary economy” as used here requires further
definition. It is both divided between the various discrete national reading markets, and unified by ever-growing multinational publishing consortiums based in the West such as HarperCollins and Bertelsmann. The advertising and distributing power of these principally Anglophone publishing giants has resulted in the phenomenon of multinational best-sellers. The linguistic dominance of English has made translating and exporting global best-sellers a largely one-way process, from Anglophone nations into other languages. Compared to other national reading markets (including those in Europe), Anglophone reading markets have remained relatively impervious to translations.99 By the mid-1980s the translation of English texts into other languages was five times more frequent than works in French, the second most popular language. There is little indication this trade deficit in translations has subsequently shrunk. In 2002 German publishers, for example, bought translation rights to 3,782 American books, while American publishers bought rights for only 150 German books.100 This unequal exchange is replicated and intensified in the case of China, whose readers have long been voracious translators and consumers of Western books, while books translated from Chinese into European languages are rarely read outside specialist circles.101 The market share of Chinese literature in English translation has long been dwarfed by that of books about China by Chinese-born authors writing directly in English.102 In this skewed system of literary exchange, the kudos attached to winning a Nobel Literature Prize represents an important route to renown in the world literary economy for non-Anglophone and, in particular, non-European writers. Nobel and global success for works written in languages other than English, and particularly non-European languages, depends, of course, largely on translation into English or other European languages (most members of the Swedish Academy, arbiters of the Nobel Literature Prize, are proficient readers in English, French, and German as well as the Nordic languages, but at any one time, only one or two are able to read non-European languages in the original). The close links between translation and winning a Nobel Prize bring non-Anglophone literature back up against the first barrier to achieving success in the world literary economy — Anglophone disinclination towards reading translations.

Anglophone insularity and the disinterested publishing circle it generates explain in part the paucity of translations from Chinese into English and their failure to generate large sales, particularly given the additional difficulty of successfully translating a language as remote from English as Chinese. Aversion to reading translations, however, does not fully explain the low status of Chinese literature. Translated fiction from Japan (whose language and culture are historically as remote from the West as those of China) has
carved out a place for itself in literary publishing in the West. A handful of modern Japanese authors — Yukio Mishima, Haruki Murakami, and Banana Yoshimoto — have become better known to a general Anglophone readership than even the two Japanese Nobel laureates, Yasunari Kawabata (1968) and Kenzaburo Oe (1994). Perhaps thanks to Japan’s postwar reinvention of itself as a pillar of global capitalism, a tiny portion of its literature has found some degree of comfortable acceptance in the West, acclaimed for its artistic worth rather than its sociopolitical interest.

Chinese literature, however, remains marginal in Western, and particularly Anglophone, consciousness. Where it is read, it tends to be read — and often dismissed — for its political rather than its literary content, thus implying it is of insufficient quality to be read for artistic value beyond its immediate sociopolitical context. Reception of modern Chinese literature as literature in the West has long been stymied by its association with (national) politics — again, C. T. Hsia’s “obsession with China.” The historical roots for this lie in the long-standing relationship in China between politics, literature, and the human sciences, a connection that is seen as alien to modern liberal Western thought. This association tightened to an unprecedented degree after 1949, with the implementation of an ideology and administrative system in China that prioritized politics above all other spheres of life. The stain of ideology affects the perception of Chinese literature in the West, where it has tended to be seen as concerned with politics, history, and didacticism. As Sture Allén, then secretary to the Nobel Committee, remarked with some truth in 1998, “[T]here was something called the Cultural Revolution that happened there. It has been a problem for China. And it has been a problem for us.”

In Britain the earliest study of modern literary texts — as opposed to those written in the classical language — in university courses coincided with the foundation of the Communist regime. Teachers of the new discipline of modern Chinese studies accepted the modern works promoted by the Chinese state “without further critical attention. The result was that students of Chinese were burdened by inferior literary texts masquerading as modern masterpieces.” Thanks to the influence of the Cold War, Chinese studies in the postwar United States, meanwhile, assumed a similarly political bent, drawing on contemporary literary texts approved by officialdom to illuminate policy formulation and implementation. Where critics did exercise judgment over texts, appraisals were often aimed at detecting the presence or absence of political virtue, namely “literary dissent.” “A simple syllogism emerged: such-and-such a work is propaganda for the Chinese government (or Communist Party); the Chinese government (or Communist Party) is bad/good; therefore

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this work is bad/good.” Small wonder, perhaps, that Anglophone readers associated modern Chinese literature with politics.

China has opened up politically, economically, and culturally since the death of Mao, permitting researchers and translators direct access to contemporary writers and the opportunity to break with official orthodoxy and select their own subjects of study. Yet sociopolitical considerations have continued to drive selection of texts and authors for translation. Many works published in English in the 1980s and 1990s continued to divide fairly tidily between political orthodoxy and dissidence, according to which of two routes to translation they had taken: through the state or through Western sinologists.

After 1979 the Chinese government set up ten new publishers with full-time in-house translators, in addition to the two that had existed since 1949, the Foreign Languages Press and the New World Press. The official press has produced 69 of the 181 translations of contemporary Chinese fiction published in the post-Mao period up until 2002; most of this translation work bears the heavy imprint of official literary orthodoxy. This corpus has left a general Western readership largely cold on grounds of both content (works are selected for their orthodoxy and are thus highly unrepresentative of the creative diversity of the contemporary literary scene) and style (works are usually translated by Chinese and only polished by native English speakers; production values are low, as is the Foreign Languages Press’s expertise in overseas promotion and distribution). In 1990 W. J. F. Jenner, an in-house translator and polisher for the Foreign Languages Press in the 1960s and 1980s, summarized its deficiencies as follows: “Design, editing, translation, the choice of titles— all these need a lot of attention if the tremendous effort and expense invested in producing the books is not to be wasted.”

The translation efforts of non-Mainland sinologists have provided Chinese authors with an alternative route to Western audiences. For much of the period since 1979, however, the choice of works to be translated has remained politically driven to a significant degree, although the politics favored by Western publishers are dissident rather than conformist. A string of translations published in the 1980s and 1990s— especially anthologies— focused on works that illustrated sociopolitical issues in the Mainland. The New Realism, one of the earliest post-Mao collections, was edited by the Hong Kong journalist Lee Yee, who identified critical realism as the flagship style of contemporary Chinese literature and selected works accordingly. Lee’s anthologizing efforts, notes Jeffrey Kinkley, “only confirmed Western impressions that the new Chinese literature cared far more about social critique than literary values.”

While finding much modern Chinese literature unappealingly politicized,
Western publishers and readers are nonetheless happy to encourage politicized Chinese literature, as long as the politics are correct. Since 1989 the rising public profile of a new Chinese dissidence has pressed Chinese writing published in the West still further into a corner occupied chiefly by memoirs of political persecution in Communist China.\textsuperscript{110} The slur of “ideology” is erased by politics progressive enough to be congenial to Western audiences. Even though exiled poets, for example, do not produce such memoirs, it has become increasingly difficult for them to achieve any kind of artistic voice independent of their political significance. As Dian Li commented in 1996, despite attempts by the exiled poet Bei Dao (1949–) to seek “forms of distance” (the title of a 1994 collection of his poetry in translation) from his political persona, and despite the increasingly inward turn of his poetry by the mid-1990s, he is now inevitably read as a poet in exile, defined by his political associations.\textsuperscript{111} Mentioning the words “Cultural Revolution” somewhere on the jacket of a work of Chinese literature has become, it seems, the most effective way to attract Western readers’ attention, even if the book itself has nothing to do with those events. The best marketing strategy for Chinese literature is to emblazon “banned in China” on the cover.\textsuperscript{112}

The politicized reception of Chinese writing in the West has not diminished since the 1990s, even as literature has become more artistically independent of politics and more pluralistic than at any other period since the founding of the People’s Republic. Those anthologies that have emphasized stylistic experimentation — *The Lost Boat: Avant-garde Fiction from China, China’s Avant-garde Fiction, Running Wild: New Chinese Writers* — have mostly been produced by small or by academic presses and have had little impact outside academic circles.\textsuperscript{113} Even the efforts of Howard Goldblatt, translator of about a dozen Mainland and Taiwanese authors who has made available to Anglophone audiences a wide range of contemporary Chinese stylists, have failed to generate much of an audience for Chinese fiction as works of literature.\textsuperscript{114} In a review of short stories written in English by Ha Jin, Justin Hill’s sweeping and inaccurate comments in *The Times Literary Supplement* are perhaps representative of the Anglophone literary world’s view of Chinese literature, which it sees as occupying one of two ends of the political spectrum and artistically null in either case: “The limited range of these stories is reminiscent of the moralizing tales of Mainland China with their neat Socialist Realist endings.” The world’s most populous country, he asserts, suffers from a “dearth of literary fiction. . . . The popularity in the West of *Wild Swans* . . . has spawned a slush pile of autobiographical ‘misery’ books, but few novels of any worth.”\textsuperscript{115}

Where Chinese literature is considered in terms of its formal literary characteristics, the one-sided cultural exchange that lies behind the rhetoric of
world literature often deems much modern Chinese literature to be “derivative of outmoded Western models, and thus condemned to a perpetual, and futile game of catch-up.” Although, concurrent with the advent of postcolonial writing in the West, apparently non-Western multicultural influences have entered the mainstream of contemporary literature (examples include the success of Latin American magical realist fiction and novels such as Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*), these works are invariably written in European languages. Thus, despite their portrayal of societies and cultures other than those of white Europe and America, they retain reassuring bonds with Western linguistic and literary traditions, which tacitly remain the touchstone for literary creativity. Gregory Lee angrily argues that common interpretations of the channels of influence between Chinese poetry and Ezra Pound at the start and close of the twentieth century provide a case in point:

That Pound should have had an impact on the modern practice of a poetic culture whose tradition he had earlier appropriated surely fits precisely the Orientalist presumptions of European modernity: the East, and the Third World in general, provides the tradition to be exploited and reinvented as the modern, and then offered back to the East as the “new,” the Western, the superior. That the East should mimic the West is taken as an indication of a lack of originality and authenticity; that the West should recuperate the East is glossed as the inventive creativity of high modernist genius.

These assertions are echoed by the comments of Stephen Owen, one of the West’s greatest authorities on classical Chinese poetry. He identifies world poetry as “a version of Anglo-American or French modernism”; after an initial encounter with Romantic poetry, twentieth-century Chinese poetry “has continued to grow by means of the engagement with modernist Western poetry; and as in any cross-cultural exchange that goes in only one direction, the culture that receives influence will always . . . appear slightly ’behind the times.’” Owen is under no illusions as to the historical causes of this one-way exchange between East and West: “Western cultural self-confidence arrived [in Asia] together with the reality of Western military and technical power.”

It is true that modern Chinese literature, particularly since the May Fourth period (1910s–1920s), has been deeply influenced by foreign, especially Western literatures. Seminal works of twentieth-century Chinese literature have drawn extensively on Western styles and models (romanticism, realism, modernism, free verse, the Chekhovian short story). Lu Xun’s highly acclaimed “Kuangren riji” (Diary of a madman) was inspired by Gogol’s story of the same name.
No post-Mao author will deny the impact that the resurgence of translated texts after the antiforeign literary drought of the Cultural Revolution has had on his or her writing. Yet it is arrogant of the West to assume either that this exchange is exclusively one-way (consider, again, the influence of classical Chinese poetry on Ezra Pound’s fashioning of a modern Anglo-American poetry) or that it produces no more than inferior literary derivatives, leaving creative initiative firmly rooted in the West. Although recent work by sinologists such as Lydia H. Liu and David Der-wei Wang has argued that modern Chinese writers creatively refashioned Western forms, many Western critics and readers still appear to have little interest in the possibility of a creative canon existing so far beyond their shores. W. J. F. Jenner bluntly states the Western reader’s prejudice against the idea of Chinese originality thus: “Anglophone readers have generally been offered not what is better than and different from their own and cognate literature, but inferior imitations and adaptations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western models. . . . Why should [Western readers] bother with Qian Zhongshu’s Weicheng when they can read Evelyn Waugh’s satirical writing in the original?”

The only hope for Chinese writers then seems to be to imbue their works with exoticism (of a political nature or otherwise), thus providing curious Western readers with insights into China’s society and psyche. This, of course, returns writers to the first problem, namely that of limiting themselves to reflecting “Chineseness” and neglecting “pure” literary qualities. It also means being read, willingly or no, as Orientalist artifacts, as exotica through which China can be “known” to the West. At the start of the 1990s, Stephen Owen accused Bei Dao of courting all constituencies with his “political virtue” and “local color,” to the detriment of Chinese aesthetic complexity. Low critical esteem for Chinese literature as art, its lack of popularity among a general readership, and its failure to generate best-sellers all contribute to low production values for translations of Chinese works. And in the increasingly commercial world of international publishing, low popularity and low production values form a vicious cycle that prevents Chinese literature from reaching a broader, more appreciative audience. These conundrums of Western reception indicate that it is not just the Chinese nation-state that has chained Chinese literature to national identity; the world literary economy, too, is “obsessed with China.” Chinese literature is both censured for being too political and then praised only for being political.

On the surface, the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Gao Xingjian for the “universal validity” of his works seems to buck this pattern of literary reception. Gao is a writer who has asserted his detachment from the nation-state
and from all “obsession with China.” Within literary circles both in Mainland China and in exile, he was until October 2000 a marginal figure who appeared to revel in his marginality, committed only to artistic experimentation in his body of drama concerned with modernist, universally existential themes. But the Swedish Academy’s enthusiasm for the “universal” value of Gao’s work becomes less convincing when we note that the Nobel judges focused primarily on his novels *Lingshan* and *Yige ren de shengjing*, both of which take an explicitly dissident stance on Chinese politics. For all the manifest appeal of the universalistic ideals touted by global institutions, careful scrutiny brings their inconsistencies to the surface.

Critics have been attempting for some time to come to terms with the relationship between nationhood and establishing a centralized value system for world literature. Probably the best-known discussion of recent years is Aijaz Ahmad’s exchange with Fredric Jameson over the latter’s essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.” Despite his overgeneralizations, Jameson’s essay manifested a laudable desire to fashion a more genuinely *world* literature at the end of the twentieth century and to effect an adjustment of aesthetic valuation for the differing significance of the nation in the literatures of the third world and the postmodern West. His honesty in stating plainly the disappointment often elicited in Western audiences on reading works of noncanonical third-world literatures precedes an attempt to refigure Western-dominated aesthetic hierarchies in which the radical difference of the noncanonical texts he selects will always be judged wanting for failing to offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce. The sociopolitical emphasis of these works, Jameson asserts, tends “to remind us of outmoded stages of our own first-world cultural development and to cause us to conclude that ‘they are still writing novels like Dreiser or Sherwood Anderson.”’ Jameson’s intention here was to revalorize the sociopolitical within an aesthetics of world literature. The political and social reading of the personal and the psychological (what Jameson calls the “national allegory”) in third-world texts, he believed, could offer a much-needed awakening of radicalism to those Western intellectuals slumbering under the anesthetic of late capitalism.

Ahmad, meanwhile, writing as a “third-world intellectual,” expressed his deep affront at Jameson’s essentializing of the third world, of the “other,” and at his construction of a binary opposition between Western and non-Western cultural production. Is the third world—whatever that means—doomed to produce nothing but “national allegory”? Is there no middle ground between American postmodernism and third-world nationalism? Ahmad feels that non-Western literatures are simply being made to dance to the two-part tune of
essentializing Orientalism and bored, apathetic fin-de-siècle Western theory: “Politically, we are Calibans all. Formally, we are fated to be in the poststructuralist world of Repetition with Difference; the same allegory, the nationalist one, rewritten, over and over again, until the end of time.”\(^{127}\) The whole exchange usefully highlights unresolved tensions underlying the ideal of world literature and one can sympathize with Jameson’s belief, even in the face of Ahmad’s searing criticism, that “these things were worth saying.”\(^{128}\) Even if this dispute failed to resolve the issue (only a remapping of modern world history or, equally impracticable, the anarchic dissolution of all concept of canon and of the institutions of literary criticism would accomplish that task), it drew attention to the splits within the universalistic ideal of world literature between “them” and “us,” to the aesthetic hierarchy in which the universalist West speaks down from high to low at the nationally obsessed non-West.

The present book probes the links between literature, nationalism, and globalization via the local example of China. I examine from various angles the different levels of discomfort expressed by Chinese obsession and ambivalence over the Nobel Prize: the tension between intellectual and political identities in modern China, the sociopolitical demands placed on the shoulders of literature, and the position occupied by China within global culture. It is not my intention to dismiss universalism as an ideology practiced by the modern West to its own hegemonic advantage; the constituency of the term is much broader and vaguer than this. Whether we like it or not, global universalism is a part of the modern cultural identity and embraces laudable philosophical and theoretical aims. This book intends rather to conduct an enquiry into one institution of global culture — the Nobel Literature Prize — rarely subjected to close critical and historical examination, and into what it represents as a modern global arbiter of aesthetic evaluation. By the same token, multiculturalism should not be repudiated as an empty, self-deluding ideal. Contemporary multiculturalism in academia has already produced many useful insights and no scholar of modern Chinese culture can afford to ignore the inherent hybridity of his or her subject of study; discourses on modern China are already inextricable from discourses on the West. If aiming for a truly plural, multicultural global realm is a worthwhile concern, then the “global” ideal, in its various manifestations, requires constant scrutiny to prevent its lapsing into a glib buzzword.

The traditional relationship between Chinese politics and the arts adds a crucial extra dimension to the whole issue of China’s position within world literature. The Platonic view of the direct connections between literature and the political regime found in *The Republic* has, it seems, more affinities with
the Chinese experience than with that of modern Western societies. Yet the longevity of this debate in both the West and China suggests that the relationship between politics and literature is one of broad and persisting significance. The Nobel Prize proclaims itself arbiter of a neutral universal global aesthetic, a position that is the product of European ideas about literature and authorship that have evolved only since the Enlightenment. In Western Europe the idea of the creative artist as an autonomous spirit above the mundane laws of morality and culture that bind the ordinary citizen is indeed of relatively recent vintage; it is no more than two centuries old. The two-tier system of criteria used by the Nobel Committee identified here and in the next chapter—writers in the Western tradition are judged on their intrinsic artistic qualities, while non-Western writers are commended as representatives of their respective nation-states—indicates that national and sociopolitical realities still play an important role in defining the terms by which literature is evaluated. Despite the commercialization and inward turn of much Western literary production, and the increasingly esoteric and nonreferential nature of much contemporary art, the link between politics and literature thus remains a question of ongoing importance and interest. The historical inconsistencies of how this relationship has developed in both the West and non-West will figure in later chapters, presenting a broader perspective on the problem. The questions posed here are of relevance both to the local issue of modern Chinese intellectual experience and to the more general issue of aesthetic values in the imperial and postimperial world.

Chapter Two will provide a detailed examination of the philosophy and practice of the Nobel Prize for Literature, analyzing the unique and controversial role it has played in arbitrating world literature and shaping ideas of a universal aesthetic over the past century. Chapter Three will give an overview of conflicting ideas about authorship in modern China from the late Qing to 1976, highlighting the tensions between national, global, and individual identities that have dogged many intellectual experiences of the modern. This narrative will include episodes relating to the Nobel Literature Prize: Lu Xun’s alleged refusal to be nominated in 1927, the reception given to Tagore (1913 laureate) and Pearl Buck (1938 laureate) in 1920s and 1930s literary China, and Qian Zhongshu’s (1910–1998) prescient satire on what would in fact become China’s Nobel Complex in his story “Linggan” (Inspiration). Chapter Four will analyze the Nobel Complex of the post-Mao decades, during which China has striven most resolutely to participate in global culture. This chapter will explain the dramatic intensification of the complex after 1979, a development linked to the painful collapse of the Maoist anti-Western worldview and
the subsequent spurning of Maoist values, the deep influence of pro-Western internationalism on Chinese political, economic, social, and cultural life, and the resurgence of intellectual culture during the 1980s. The fifth and concluding chapter will draw out the significance of Gao Xingjian’s Nobel Prize, examining Gao’s prize-winning works and reactions to his prize all over the world, particularly in Mainland China.