

# 'Pan-literature' trend reshapes literary landscape

## LITERATURE

By HUANG WENHU

The term "pan-literature" refers to an ongoing important cultural phenomenon which blurs the boundary between literary and non-literary representations. Significantly impacting traditional literary scholarship, the pan-literature trend deprives traditional literary writings of clear, self-contained borders while admitting the "legitimacy" of non-literary expressions to varying degrees. As such, traditional literature not only faces potential risks of being supplanted by non-literary works, but is also called to expand its own boundaries and inject new vitality into the field.

### 'Aestheticization of everyday life'

Pan-literature is closely associated with the "aestheticization of everyday life," a concept expounded on by British scholar Mike Featherstone in his 1991 book *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*.

According to Featherstone, the process of aestheticizing everyday life involves the growth and development of "artistic subcultures," the project of turning everyday life into a work of art, and the rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life.

Western scholars, such as Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, and Jean Baudrillard, profoundly criticized the "aesthetic hallucination" as termed by Featherstone, which is subject to consumerism.

The aestheticization of everyday life also received extensive attention in communities of Chinese literature, art, and aesthetics and sparked heated discussions in the early 21st century. Scholars like Tong Qingbing, Henry Yiheng Zhao, and Gao Jianping all shed light on this issue.

Generally, their discussions focused on whether the aestheticization of everyday life is justified for literature and art. Opponents argued that the aestheticization of everyday life might generate a slew of negative effects, under the impact of consumerism and new media technology, causing literature and art to be appropriated by the business and entertainment sectors and leading content creators to depart from the pure foothold carved out by literature and the spirit of humanism. Meanwhile, advocates maintained that aestheticizing everyday life is conducive to expanding the landscape of literature and art and capable of tightening the internal bond between literature, art, and everyday life.

In contrast, the opposing side took an elitist stance to defend the territory of serious literature and high arts, while those in support of everyday aesthetics spoke of popular culture, emphasizing the construction of "pan-aesthetic" and



A girl pays one yuan with her smart phone via a POS terminal at Shanghai Metro's Lujiazui Station, to buy poems written by "left-behind" children in impoverished rural areas, amid the branding campaign "Poetry POS Machine" staged by China UnionPay. Photo: CFP

diverse models of literary expression with literary characteristics which move beyond highbrow and lowbrow.

To be honest, the two contrasting views actually reflect traditional literature's spillover, an irreversible literary trend in development since the beginning of the 21st century, from both sides of the coin.

As an immediate result of the spillover, traditional genres, such as fiction, poetry, and prose, have exhibited distinctive "trans-boundary" features, as exemplified by non-fiction writing which combines in-depth reporting and documentary writing, and advertorial poems that mix advertisement and poetry.

These practical forms of representation also have literary or artistic features, but they don't belong to traditional literature or art which is built upon non-utilitarian expression. Pan-literature highlights a new type of literary aesthetics that is closer to public life, which results from an organic integration of non-practical and practical expressions.

### Blurring boundaries of literature

The core crisis facing pan-literature is that the boundaries of traditional literature are blurring, and even disappearing. Revolutionary changes to the communication ecosystem in the internet era are largely to blame. Under the impact of new media, traditional literary genres are losing their original critical power and influence.

From the angle of essentialism, the decline of traditional literary genres is usually regarded as a sign of pure literature's leaning towards vulgar and superficial popular culture. Elitists contend that the public's excessive pursuit of instant sensory pleasures and lack of deep reading and contemplation are the crucial reasons why classical literature is losing ground.

Specifically, the blurring of traditional literature's borders is manifested in the following three aspects.

The first manifestation involves changes to literary production's form. In the pre-internet age, due to simple literary communication

channels and limited communication mediums—predominantly paper media—literary producers were mostly industry professionals, such as professional writers. They tended to publish and disseminate their works through professional literary periodicals or influential publishing houses.

However, with the diversification of communication vehicles after the arrival of the internet era, a range of professional, semi-professional, or amateur web writers disrupted the original gatekeeping mechanism and contributed to a boom in online literature. Meanwhile, this spawned a disordered literary market, and diverted literary production to a utilitarian model that overemphasizes public attention and panders to public needs.

Second, literary expression and communication patterns have evolved. In the paper media age, literary creation mainly relied on language and text. In the internet era, multimedia expressions, mainly through images and videos, have come to occupy a dominant position, overshadowing traditional literary genres like fiction and poetry from the paper media age.

In the fragmented communication ecosystem established on the internet, visual media obviously meets the public's sensory appeals more easily and complies with the "traffic-first" market logic, whereas the communication threshold for textual mediums is much higher than for visual carriers. Consequently, traditional literary forms which rely on textual expressions pale by comparison with visual media.

Third, the way of engaging with literature has altered. In the internet age, digital screens have no longer restricted reading to the closed literary world. Readers can enter another totally different multi-media realm with infinite possibilities by merely sliding their fingers. Continual attention shifts on the internet force almost all literary representations to yield to the "communication-first" principle, in order to amplify communication. This comes at the cost of deep criticism and reflection, as pursued by

serious literature.

Nevertheless, from evolutionary perspectives, traditional literary genres like fiction, prose, and poetry have been unable to fully cover all literary types in the internet era. In the meantime, challenges to literary creation in the pre-internet age indicate that traditional literature hasn't adapted well to the new communication environment constructed by the internet, yet.

However, crises triggered by the pan-literature trend by no means represent the "end of literature." Just the opposite, blurring boundaries of traditional literature imply that literary and non-literary expressions are more likely to intersect and integrate with each other. To unleash literary discourse's power in criticizing reality and its humanistic spirit of pursuing the true, the good, and the beautiful, it is vital to think out of the box and seek alternatives to traditional literary forms.

### Crossing genres and media

While breaking down established boundaries in literature, the pan-literature trend has begun to bring literary activities into everyday life. Trans-boundary phenomena arising from the trend show typical features of cross-genre narration and cross-media integration, which complement each other.

First, cross-genre narration has become a norm in literature. Literary discourse is in essence a narrative behavior. Emotions and stories are at the core of narration, for poetry and fiction, respectively. Many genres, such as news and advertorials, are narrative. In the internet-based communication context, literary and non-literary writings like news and advertorials have begun mixing expressions across genres. This doesn't mean that the literary boundary is eroded by other genres. Rather, it suggests that "literariness" is gradually blending into non-literary representations, constituting cross-genre narration.

For instance, since 2019, Chinese financial services corporation China UnionPay has been staging a serial charity campaign dubbed the "Poetry POS Machine," under

the theme of "Let the Talents in the Mountains be Seen," successively in Shanghai, Xiamen, and other locations. Users can pay one yuan via POS machine for poems written by a group of "left-behind" children living in mountainous areas. The donations will be used to provide art and literature lessons for these children.

Although it is a branding campaign for China UnionPay, it has objectively embodied the charm of literature on three levels. First it called on society to pay attention to the spiritual lives of impoverished children in the mountains, displaying the unique human touch of literary discourse. Second, it can be regarded as a ceremonial promotion of poetry. Moreover, donations from the campaign have funded more than 3,000 children to receive art and literature education, demonstrating the real power of literature to influence realities and make a difference in society.

Therefore, the "Poetry POS Machine" campaign is a classic example of cross-genre narration for its fusion of literature, advertisement, and news. In other words, advertisement-oriented poetry involving children in mountainous areas doesn't digress from literature's humanistic spirit of attending to and helping disadvantaged groups, but it heavily underlines the humanity of literary discourse.

Cross-media integration represents an overall trend in literature. In the paper media age, literary activities took text and language as the main carriers of symbols. With the advent of the internet era, visual expressions are far more effective in communication than traditional literature. Amid the turn to images and videos, traditional literature has to go beyond its original vehicles of language and text to appeal to ordinary people, embedding modern literary themes and reflective humane sentiments into different media forms to create a diversified, multi-dimensional "multimedia matrix."

From the perspective of literary communication, pan-literature doesn't foretell the demise of literature. Even if literature itself is being replaced by omnipresent literariness, it doesn't mean that literary discourse has lost its legitimacy to exist. On the contrary, it mirrors the re-demarcation of literary borders and the renewal of literary meaning. In the context of internet communication, it is necessary to keep an open and positive mind to embrace the trans-boundary symbiosis of literary and non-literary representations and accept new literary forms marked by cross-genre narration and cross-media integration. Only in this way can literature shine bright with an inclination toward goodness and the brilliance of humanity.

Huang Wenhui is from the School of Journalism and Communication at Huaqiao University.