Studies in Linguistics and Literature
ISSN 2573-6434 (Print) ISSN 2573-6426 (Online)
Vol. 9, No. 3, 2025
www.scholink.org/ojs/index.php/sll

Original Paper

The Refraction of Magical Realism—On the Misreading and Interpretation of "Magical Realism" in China

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Received: June 18, 2025 Accepted: June 30, 2025 Online Published: July 18, 2025

doi:10.22158/sll.v9n3p37 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v9n3p37

Abstract

This paper explores the cross-cultural reception and reinterpretation of Latin American magical realism in China through the theoretical lens of David Damrosch's concept of "refraction" in world literature. It argues that magical realism, originally a postcolonial narrative strategy rooted in Latin American historical trauma and political critique, underwent significant semantic transformation upon its introduction to China. Influenced by Anglo-American critical mediation, delayed theoretical contextualization, and domestic market forces, early Chinese readings often reduced magical realism to a stylistic or fantastical mode, overlooking its ideological depth. However, as Chinese scholarship and literary practice evolved, a more historically and politically grounded understanding emerged, enabling a creative synthesis between magical realism and Chinese cultural experiences. The paper concludes that this process of misreading and reinterpretation, while initially problematic, ultimately contributed to the development of a distinctive Chinese magical realism and enriched the global literary landscape.

Keywords

magical realism, world literature, David Damrosch, cross-cultural reception, Chinese literature

1. Introduction

American literary theorist David Damrosch (2003) identifies a set of typical mechanisms through which texts become "world literature": World literature is an elliptical refraction of national literature. The dissemination of Latin American magical realism in China offers a prime example. As a literary strategy deeply rooted in postcolonial critique, magical realism rewrites modern national violence, colonial history, religious hybridity, and collective trauma. Yet in the Chinese context, it is often reconstructed in translation and reception as an exotic, fantasy-oriented literary mode—sometimes even categorized under the "Zhiguai literature". This process perfectly exemplifies Damrosch's theoretical

insight into the dynamics of global literary transmission.

This paper intends to conduct an in-depth analysis of the misinterpretation and reinterpretation of magical realism during its dissemination and reception in China based on Damrosch's theory of "refraction", exploring its evolution and reconstruction in different cultural contexts. As Santana-Acuña (2014) points out in his study on the classicization of One Hundred Years of Solitude: The centrality of transcendence and appropriation in the process of classicization does not mean that the cultural object is floating freely in a vacuum of causal space, but rather that its vernacular organizational context and non-vernacular organizational context s are part of a larger socio-cultural formation that exists across contexts and is not context-dependent.

The aim is to reveal the manifestations of magical realism in the soil of Chinese culture and its implications and significance for the exchange and mutual learning between Chinese and Latin American civilizations. Through cross-cultural comparative analysis, this paper seeks to provide new perspectives and ideas for Sino-Latin American literary and cultural exchanges, promoting deeper mutual understanding and reference between the two sides.

2. Refraction as Method: Damrosch's World Literature and the Chinese Adaptation of Magical Realism

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, Magical Realism has garnered widespread global attention as a distinctive literary response from Latin America to modernity, Western rationalist narratives, and the legacies of colonialism. In particular, following the publication of Gabriel García Márquez's (1967) One Hundred Years of Solitude, this literary trend rapidly transcended its Latin American context, disseminating throughout the Western world and gradually being incorporated into the canon of "world literature". From the 1980s onward, driven by the cultural transformations accompanying China's Reform and Opening-up, the Chinese literary world swiftly introduced works of Magical Realism, triggering a "Latin American literature fever". Professor Teng Wei (2011) recorded it in her article as follows: The nearly forty articles on Gabriel García Márquez published in 1982-1983 almost without exception referred to "magical realism"... The influence of magic realist literature began to show up in Chinese literary works afterwards, and reached its peak in the overall brilliance of the root-seeking and avant-garde novels from 1985 to 1987. In this process, Magical Realism has evolved beyond a mere literary phenomenon, becoming an aesthetic style, a narrative technique, and even a cultural symbol of "exotic literary imagination".

However, compared to its politically charged, historically grounded, and culturally hybrid nature within the Latin American context, the reception of Magical Realism in China has exhibited clear tendencies toward simplification and misreading. These misreadings primarily manifest in three forms. First, the term "magical" is often misunderstood as "fantasy" or "supernatural", thus reducing Magical Realism to a form of fantasy literature characterized by mysticism. Second, the historical context and social structures embedded within the texts are disregarded, leading to the perception of Magical Realism as

merely a literary technique or aesthetic style. Third, there is a prevalent inclination to draw superficial analogies between Magical Realism and Chinese traditions such as Zhiguai literature or mythological narratives, thereby overlooking its function as a mode of postcolonial critique rooted in the lived realities of Latin American society. Such modes of reception not only obscure the deeper cultural mechanisms of Magical Realism but also, to a certain extent, depoliticize texts that were originally infused with potent critical intent.

These phenomena are far from coincidental. The Chinese misreading and simplification of Magical Realism constitute typical manifestations of "recontextualization" and "semantic reconfiguration" within the global circulation of literature. As David Damrosch (2003) emphasizes in his work What Is World Literature?, world literature is not a fixed corpus of canonical texts but rather a dynamic process in which texts circulate, are reinterpreted, and are reconfigured across cultural contexts. He highlights that when a work is detached from its original context and enters a different cultural system, it often undergoes semantic transformations driven by factors such as language, reception mechanisms, ideological frameworks, and market dynamics. "Lacking specilized knowledge, the foreign reader is likely to impose domestic literary values on the foreign work, and even careful scholarly attempts to read a foreign work in light of a Western critical theory are deeply problematic". Such transformations are not limited to individual readers' misinterpretations but also reflect systematic mediation through translators, publishers, and academic discourse.

In his book, David Damrosch (2003) offers a groundbreaking redefinition of the concept of "world literature". He argues that world literature is not a fixed corpus of canonical masterpieces universally recognized as "great works", but rather "a mode of circulation and of reading that enables literary works to acquire new meanings as they move beyond their culture of origin". In this sense, "world literature" does not refer to an inherent identity but to a dynamic, practice-based process through which literary works are continuously recreated in the act of circulation.

In addition, Damrosch (2003) emphasizes the notions of literary mobility and recontextualization. Once a text enters a new cultural field, its meaning is no longer a mere extension of its original significance but rather the product of translation, interpretation, and reconfiguration. Works of world literature take on a new life as they move into the world at large, and to understand this new life we need to look closely at the ways the work becomes reframed in its translations and in its new cultural contexts. This theoretical shift breaks away from narrow, universalist definitions of world literature and foregrounds the role of power relations, discursive selection, and cultural misreadings in literary transmission. This theory endows us with a brand - new perspective to interpret the circulation and interpretation of world literature. It's not only the dissemination of magical realism in China that sees the phenomenon of "refraction". The cross-cultural transmission of any kind of literature in the world is a process of re-interpretation.

Drawing on David Damrosch's theoretical framework of world literature, this article examines the structural misreading of magical realism within the Chinese context. Such misreading is not merely the result of isolated translation errors, critical biases, or individual reader misunderstandings, but rather the product of broader cultural mechanisms of "selective reception" and "semiotic reconstruction". By tracing the introduction pathways, reception patterns, and re-encoding strategies of magical realism in China, the article reveals how it has been transformed from a "re-narration of Latin American history" into a "re-consumption of cultural spectacle". Yet this process of misreading is not a one-dimensional loss of cultural meaning—it has, paradoxically, opened new imaginative horizons for contemporary Chinese literary practice. When Chinese writers detached the "magical" element from its original Latin American historical context and grafted it onto Chinese rural or urban narratives, a uniquely Chinese mode of magical realism emerged, one that fused critical edge with aesthetic tension. This hybrid form supplied crucial aesthetic resources for the "root-seeking" literature of the 1980s, the avant-garde writing of the 1990s, and the new-century rural narratives that followed. In her monograph The Reception of Magical Realism in China, Zeng Lijun (2007) extensively documents Chinese writers' reception and assimilation of Latin American authors.

As Sino-Latin American cultural exchange has deepened, Chinese scholars and writers have progressively revised their understanding of magical realism. Early simplifications that reduced it to a "surreal + indigenous" spectacle have given way to a more holistic grasp of its triadic core: historical trauma, political allegory, and narrative revolution. This ongoing realignment with the term's original context not only enriches the interpretive dimensions of contemporary literary criticism but also lays a more solid intertextual foundation for future dialogues between Chinese and Latin American literatures.

In the circulation of world literature, English-language criticism has consistently dominated the discourse. As in Damrosch's view (2003), the global circulation of literature is not a neutral or egalitarian process of cultural exchange. Rather, it is shaped by several structural factors: The dominance of English as an intermediary language means that most non-English literatures circulate internationally primarily through English translations, resulting in forms of secondary, mediated reception for many target cultures. "Even today, foreign works will rarely be translated at all in the United States, much less widely distributed, unless they reflect American concerns and fit comfortably with American images of the foreign culture in question". Moreover, only works perceived as having "commercial potential" are likely to be translated and circulated. Thus, a text's "marketability" often overrides its "authenticity". Global literary systems exhibit a preference for works that evoke "cultural spectacle" rather than those containing strong local political critiques or historical complexities.

World literature circulates within an unequal global structure marked by linguistic hierarchies and disparities in cultural capital. English often serves as a mediating language, resulting in a layered, filtered transmission of non-English literatures such as Spanish-language works into non-Western

contexts like China. This produces further semantic displacement. More complex still is the fact that such misreadings are not confined to general readerships but are also embedded within academic discourses. Some Chinese scholars, overly reliant on Euro-American theoretical frameworks for "fantasy literature", have neglected the unique semantic position of Magical Realism within its Latin American context—its roots in indigenous cultures, colonial histories, and anti-capitalist narrative traditions.

Damrosch's theory of world literature offers not only an analytical model for understanding the transnational circulation of literary works but also a critical lens for uncovering the structural problems inherent in this process—namely, the depoliticization of literary works and the exaggeration of their "spectacular" qualities during cross-cultural transmission. These mechanisms are particularly evident within the Chinese context. As China is not a direct recipient of Latin American literature but rather engages with it primarily through Euro-American intermediaries, combined with a relatively closed literary market and the inertia of traditional narrative structures, the original critical function of Magical Realism is systematically reconfigured. It is repackaged as "magical exotic writing", "Latin American myth and fairytale", or "a new direction for literary technique"—in short, what circulates in China is not Magical Realism in its original critical form, but a version trimmed, reshaped, and rendered consumable within the global literary marketplace.

As was stated above, the misreading of Magical Realism in China is not merely a matter of reader comprehension or theoretical literacy, but rather the inevitable outcome of a global literary system shaped by cultural mechanisms of selective reception and semiotic reconfiguration. Through examining the reception history, critical discourse, and publishing trajectories of Magical Realism in China, it investigates how this literary mode has been transformed from a vehicle of Latin American social critique into an exoticized, depoliticized "cultural spectacle" for consumption. As Damrosch (2003) states: Works become world literature by being received into the space of a foreign culture, a space defined in many ways by the host culture's national tradition and the present needs of its own writers. Even a single work of world literature is the locus of a negotiation between two different cultures. Furthermore, the article explores the cultural power structures and transmission paradoxes embedded in this process.

Damrosch's theory (2003) emphasizes that world literature is not defined by any inherent literary essence but emerges through a phenomenological process of transformation as texts cross cultural and political boundaries. "literature stays within its national or regional tradition when it usually loses in translation, whereas works become world literature when they gain on balance in translation, stylistic losses offset by an expansion in depth as they increase their range". This theoretical framework is particularly pertinent for analyzing the Chinese reception of Magical Realism. Originally emerging from the socio-political and cultural complexities of Latin America, Magical Realism constitutes a narrative strategy aimed at challenging the hegemonic discourse of Western rationality through the

fusion of the real and the fantastic, fragmented temporal structures, and mythologized historical allegories. Yet, upon entering the Chinese cultural context, these deeper dimensions are frequently compressed into an "exotic literary style" or a "fantasy narrative template". When introducing Magical Realism, Chinese academia and the publishing industry have often tended to emphasize its "magical" formal characteristics. This emphasis on formal characteristics has enabled "Magical Realism" to be well-promoted in China and become one of the most popular Western literary forms.

According to the latest research, magical realism is not merely a literary genre but also a response to the phenomenon of "Othering". Christopher Warnes (2009) in his book Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence asserts:

Magical realism in its postcolonial forms can thus be seen as a response to the "othering" that accompanies Western colonialism, supported as it is in the modern period by the universalist claims of reason. It is an attempt to escape from the violence, epistemic or actual, of rational truth's "grasp on things" by calling into question post-Enlightenment certainties about what is real and what is not.

The elements in magical realist works that delve into indigenous cultures and critique Western rational hegemony make it an important bridge connecting the Global South, promoting mutual understanding and respect, and also driving the development of global literary diversity. With the rise of the Global South, both Latin America and China will face the concept of "world literature" in new literary forms, as Professor Zhang Longxi (2021) states:

Over the past forty years, the great achievements of China's reform and opening up, as well as the economic development of Asia and South America, have been the macro background for the changes in literary and cultural phenomena. The significant changes in the global economy and world politics will inevitably have an impact on the field of literature and culture. In global academic research, the critique of Eurocentrism has become a consensus in the academic community, which is bound to help break the previous limitations centered on the West and promote the revival of world literature.

Damrosch's framework underscores the inevitable dual processes of semantic transformation and cultural reconfiguration that accompany global literary circulation—processes that serve both as the precondition for a work to become "world literature" and as the structural source of its potential misreading and commodification. From this theoretical perspective, the reception and misreading of Magical Realism in China are not isolated phenomena arising from cultural difference or translation shortcomings; rather, they are systematic outcomes of the internal mechanisms operating within the global literary system. In the past decade, China's understanding of "Magical Realism" has grown increasingly comprehensive, yet this has also generated new challenges. On the one hand, Latin American literature itself has evolved: a new generation of writers is actively seeking to move beyond the "magical" paradigm. On the other hand, Latin America's engagement with contemporary Chinese literature remains strikingly limited. Damrosch's concept of the "elliptical refraction" of world literature thus retains its explanatory power for the foreseeable future, even as we recognize the urgent

need for deeper, more reciprocal cultural exchanges to bridge these asymmetries.

3. Distorted Reflections: Misreading Magical Realism in Early Chinese Reception

Before we delve into the dissemination history and localized reinterpretation of "magical realism" in China, it is necessary to look back at China's cognitive framework of Latin American and even global relations. Before the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, the geographical distance objectively limited the depth of exchanges between the two sides, and China's knowledge of Latin American societies in general was relatively weak. Nonetheless, the dominant Chinese perspective at the time, significantly influenced by the Cuban Revolution and the image of Fidel Castro, generally understood Latin America in the context of the "Third World", a political and identity category that encompassed both anti-imperialist and anti-colonial aspirations. More critically, a specific theoretical background profoundly shaped China's early reception of Latin American literature: in the early 1980s, the postcolonial theoretical system (and its related concepts, such as Edward Said's "Orientalism") had not yet been translated and widely discussed in the academic world. This lack of theoretical background made China's introduction and interpretation of Latin American literature, especially magical realism, lack the key theoretical lenses and background knowledge needed to understand its deep historical and cultural implications and socio-political critical dimensions.

The lack of direct cultural or historical connections between modern Chinese literature and Latin American literature constitutes a fundamental obstacle to the reception of Magical Realism in China. As a distinct literary mode, Magical Realism is deeply rooted in the specific socio-historical conditions of Latin America, including the legacies of colonialism, political violence, cultural hybridity, and the interweaving of indigenous and European traditions. By contrast, Chinese literary traditions and the trajectory of modern literary development differ significantly from those of Latin America in terms of geography, culture, and historical experience, leaving little basis for a natural contextual connection. As a result, the reception of Magical Realism in China has inevitably depended on an intermediary process of cultural translation, largely dominated by the Anglo-American literary system.

The English-speaking world has constructed a powerful intermediary discursive field that shapes how Latin American literature is framed, interpreted, and disseminated. The complex historical traumas, social tensions, and identity struggles that underpin Latin American literature are frequently filtered out by Anglophone discourse, which often simplifies these dimensions into exotic literary tropes or stylistic features associated with fantastical storytelling. Damrosch (2003) describes this phenomenon in his book as follows: Tim Brennan and others have criticized the manipulations by which the political edge has often been taken from works imported into the American context, but it is not enough to have our politics in the right place. All works are subject to manipulation and even deformation in their foreign reception, but established classics usually gain a degree of protection by their cultural prestige. Chinese translators, publishers, and scholars largely depend on English as a mediating language, encountering

Latin American literature primarily through Anglophone criticism and translated texts. This indirect mode of transmission inevitably results in the obfuscation of the source culture.

The Chinese reception of Gabriel García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude provides a clear illustration of this historical rupture. Widely regarded as a hallmark of Latin American Magical Realism, the novel fundamentally constitutes a profound literary reflection on Latin American history, colonial legacies, and political oppression. Garc á Márquez (1982) himself repeatedly emphasized: "No hay en mis novelas una línea que no esté basada en la realidad". Most Latin American writers likewise reject the label "magical realism". Donald L. Shaw (2002) also points out this misunderstanding in his related research: While it should never be forgotten that Asturias always insisted on the primacy of sociopolitical protest in his work, insisting even in his Nobel Prize winning oration on the need for writers to "dar testimonio", critics other than those on the left have tended to see this nowadays as increasingly anachronistic and to emphasize his Magical Realism. Besides, prominent U.S. venues such as The New York Review of Books, along with widely used comparative-literature textbooks, continue to entrench "magical realism" as the definitive descriptor for Latin American literature. Against this backdrop of international dissemination, scholar Teng Wei (2011) observes that particularly during the period from the 1980s to the early 21st century, Chinese interpretations of One Hundred Years of Solitude have predominantly treated it as a fashionable literary trend or a "global literary phenomenon", often packaging it as a work infused with mystical charm and poetic imagination.

Moreover, another factor that cannot be overlooked is the lag in theoretical perspectives. The introduction and dissemination of postcolonial theory and cultural hybridity theory within Chinese academia have significantly lagged behind developments in the West, particularly during the critical period of the 1980s and early 1990s. According to Professor Zhang Deming's (2013) retrospective account, postcolonial theory entered China in the early 1990s: In 1990, Literary Review and Dushu magazine first introduced Edward Said's Orientalism and Fredric Jameson's Third World theory, launching theoretical dissemination. In 1992, Dushu promoted the debate around Black Athena, stressing that critiques of Western hegemony must rise above emotionalism. In 1993, the journal published three essays by overseas Chinese scholars and an article challenging Western civilization narratives via Lü Shuxiang's translation of Civilization and Barbarism, which sparked heated academic discussion. Peking University and other institutions held forums, journals such as Tianya joined the debate, and Zhang Yimou's films became the first targets of postcolonial critique—scholars accused his narratives of pandering to Western exoticized fantasies of the East. Only after this did postcolonial theory gradually gain deeper traction in academic circles, becoming a focal theoretical framework in disciplines such as sociology, literary studies, and related fields.

Thus, the introduction of postcolonial theory lagged a full decade behind the popularization of Magical Realism in China. At the height of the "Magical Realism fever", Chinese academia lacked robust theoretical frameworks for critical analysis. Compounded by limited knowledge of Latin America's

historical and political contexts, research on Magical Realism in China remained confined to superficial readings of cultural symbols, failing to uncover the deeper cultural conflicts and power dynamics embedded in the texts. Academic discussions exhibited a pronounced "formalist" bias—overemphasizing aesthetic techniques and stylistic innovation while neglecting the genre's role as a vehicle for cultural and political discourse. This shallow theoretical engagement reinforced a one-dimensional understanding of Magical Realism, reducing it in the Chinese context to an exotic aesthetic symbol or decorative trope rather than recognizing it as a complex intersection of culture, history, and identity.

As Damrosch's theory (2003) of world literature reveals, To use translations means to accept the reality that texts come to us mediated by existing frameworks of reception and interpretation. We necessarily work in collaboration with others who have shaped what we read and how we read it. The interpretation of "magic" in the Chinese context is not a simple transplantation of the original Latin American concepts, but a creative reconstruction of "magic" based on the framework of local cultural cognition—a reconstruction process that is not only constrained by the traditional Chinese tradition of fantasy narratives and folk belief systems, but also implies the need to recode exotic symbols in the logic of contemporary cultural consumption. It is a creative reconstruction of "magic" based on the local cultural cognitive framework, a reconstruction process that is not only constrained by the traditional Chinese tradition of the "magic" narrative and folk belief system, but also implies the need to re-code the exotic symbols in the logic of contemporary cultural consumption.

The term Magical Realism is rendered in Chinese as "魔幻现实主义" (mohuan xianshi zhuyi), a translation that, while seemingly a literal rendering, conceals inherent risks of conceptual distortion and has become a major source of systematic misreading among Chinese readers. Crucially, the term Magical Realism did not emerge in a vacuum; its origins can be traced to early 20th-century German art criticism, where Franz Roh coined the term magischer Realismus in 1925 to describe an artistic style that, through meticulous observation and representation of reality, evokes a sense of mystery that transcends ordinary sensory experience. This "magical" element is not a reference to fictitious magic but to a "magic of reality"—a form of philosophical reflection and aesthetic reinvention that deepens and renews traditional realism. Maggie Ann Bowers (2004) once summarized the historical connotations of this term as follows:

The history of magic(al) realism, that is, of the related terms of magical realism, magical realism and marvellous realism, is a complicated story spanning eight decades with three principal turning points and many characters. The first period is set in Germany in the 1920s, the second period in Central America in the 1940s and the third period, beginning in 1955 in Latin America, continues internationally to this day. All these periods are linked by literary and artistic figures whose works spread the influence of magic(al) realism around Europe, from Europe to Latin America, and from Latin America to the rest of the world (Bowers, 2004, p. 7).

By the time the term “Magical Realism” traveled from German art criticism through Latin American literary practice and finally reached China, its original connotation of “the mystery of reality” had been progressively eroded in translation and reception, degenerating into a one-dimensional fixation on “fantastical elements”. In Chinese, the term “魔幻” (mohuan) is commonly understood as synonymous with “magic” or “fantasy”, often carrying connotations of the supernatural, mystical, and even folkloric imagination. As a result, readers tend to interpret Magical Realism as a form of fantasy literature characterized by magical powers or supernatural elements. This linguistic misrepresentation is not merely a matter of translation, but reflects a deeper conceptual bias within the Chinese cultural context. Given that the term “魔幻” is often associated with traditional Chinese narratives of spirits, deities, and the supernatural, readers and critics alike find it difficult to transcend these familiar cultural categories when encountering the foreign literary phenomenon of Magical Realism, leading to pervasive misinterpretations and misconceptions. Professor Teng Wei (2021) criticizes this misconception: Some of them were even trying to do some analysis from the perspective of magical realism in classical Chinese canons, such as poems by Qu Yuan, Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio (《聊斋志异》) by Pu Songling, and A Dream of Red Mansions (《红楼梦》) and A Journey to the West (《西游记》).

The Chinese tradition of Zhiguai literature is deeply rooted in literati accounts of supernatural phenomena, mythical beings, and anomalous events. These narratives primarily seek to evoke wonder and mystery, emphasizing the strange and the marvelous while constructing an imaginary world largely detached from social and political realities. By contrast, although Latin American Magical Realism similarly integrates non-realist elements into its narratives, the “magical” dimension is not simply a source of fantasy or mystery. Rather, it is intimately linked to the specific historical realities, political oppression, and cultural hybridity of Latin America. Through the incorporation of diverse cultural symbols—ranging from indigenous religious beliefs to Catholic iconography and the enduring social contradictions of colonialism—Magical Realism constructs a narrative mode imbued with profound historical reflection and socio-political critique.

This essential difference in cultural background and narrative function has been largely overlooked or marginalized in the Chinese reception of Magical Realism. By reducing Magical Realism to a modern iteration of Zhiguai literature, critics obscure its hybridity and postcoloniality. The analogical mode of interpretation encourages readers to conflate the multilayered, historically grounded realities of Latin America with the supernatural tales of Chinese folklore, misreading Magical Realism as a form of exotic cultural spectacle or fantastical anecdote. Such misreadings not only strip the texts of their embedded historical experiences but also diminish their function as literary strategies of resistance against colonial domination and social injustice. Professor Teng Wei (2021) documents in her monograph the collective misreading of “Magical Realism” by Chinese writers at the time:

At that time writers from minority areas such as Xizang, Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Guangxi province, believing that their hometowns were very similar to Latin America in geography and culture,

paid a lot of attention to magical realism....The Yunnan People's Publishing House classified the Latin American literature series as a priority and applied to join the National Eighth Five - Year Publishing Plan. It was believed that China shared a great number of similarities in cultural traditions with Latin America.

In the circulation of world literature, publishing and distribution play a crucial role. Scholar Herrero-Olaizola (2005) once examined the relationship between Spanish publishing strategies and the Latin American literary Boom, pointing out: "Indeed, for the Boom writers, for Seix Barral, and for the Spanish government, publishing matters in the literary market of the 1960s and 1970s". In China, the promotion of Latin American literature is also closely tied to publishing and distribution. The awarding of the 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature to Gabriel García Márquez directly triggered the unprecedented popularity of the "magical realism" genre in China. Aiming at this market opportunity, the domestic publishing industry has adopted a very attractive marketing strategy for the effective promotion of Latin American literature: not only the publishers themselves, but also some scholars, have coincidentally tended to label "magical realism" as a core selling point. For example, Isabel Allende has been labeled as "Márquez in a dress"; similarly, a large number of Latin American novels have been defined simply as having "magical" qualities. This practice of generalizing the label of "magical realism" and using it as the primary marketing discourse, instead of contributing to readers' in-depth understanding of the diversity of Latin American literature, has objectively reinforced and solidified a one-sided cognitive paradigm—that of "magic". Instead of contributing to readers' deeper understanding of the diversity of Latin American literature, it has objectively reinforced and solidified a one-sided cognitive paradigm that sees "magic" as the dominant, almost monolithic, feature of Latin American literature, thus exacerbating stereotypes of its artistic landscape.

In practical terms, Chinese publishers frequently design book covers featuring exotic visual elements such as tropical rainforests, mysterious tribes, and magical symbols to attract readers' attention. Promotional materials and introductory blurbs often emphasize phrases like "the magical land of Latin America" or "a mysterious world of enchantment", thereby constructing a sense of novelty and exoticism. This marketing approach intentionally or unintentionally reduces Magical Realism to a form of "fantasy literature" or "mysterious storytelling", while obscuring the socio-historical backgrounds and profound political critiques embedded within these works. Translation choices and strategies likewise tend to highlight passages rich in magical imagery or symbolic content, often at the expense of adequately presenting the complex social realities and historical traumas underlying the texts. This spectacularized packaging satisfies contemporary Chinese readers' strong curiosity for foreign cultures and fantastical elements, transforming Magical Realism into a fashionable cultural symbol and consumer trend. However, the side effects of this cultural consumption model are readily apparent. Readers, in consuming Magical Realism texts, often remain fixated on their superficial strangeness, neglecting the cultural complexity, historical depth, and social critique they contain. The political

implications and historical contexts of these works are diluted, reduced to cultural commodities that offer entertainment and visual enjoyment.

From the 1980s through the first decade of the 21st century, China's reading of "magic" underwent a triple refraction: the dominance of Anglo-American literary criticism, the delayed arrival of postcolonial theory, and the commercial logic of book-marketing strategies. Such distortions are an almost inevitable by-product of cross-cultural circulation. Over the past ten years, as Chinese scholarship on Latin American literature and history has deepened, the study of magical realism has begun to correct course. Yet a temporal lag persists: in China, magical realism remains the shorthand for Latin American writing, whereas in Latin America itself a new generation of authors is already experimenting with fresh modes of expression.

4. Beyond the Miraculous: Recovering History and Politics in China's Renewed Understanding of Magical Realism

Since García Márquez's Nobel Prize in 1982, Chinese literary scholars and comparatists have undertaken a two-stage critical trajectory: first, the importation of magical realism into the Chinese critical lexicon; second, its contextual re-situation within the socio-political and cultural milieu of 1950s–60s Latin America. This dual process has systematically dismantled the reductive equation "magical realism = ethnic fantasy", effecting a paradigmatic shift from formalist aesthetics to politically and historically grounded analysis. Concurrently, the critical discourse has evolved from monolithic cultural relativism toward complex cross-cultural dialogism. Through sustained, multi-dimensional scholarly praxis, Chinese researchers are actively deconstructing and reconstructing the epistemic framework of Latin American literature, thereby contributing fresh theoretical perspectives to the global scholarly conversation on this literary tradition.

Professor Zeng Lijun (2007) observes that while "creative misreading" can naturally benefit literature by fostering new aesthetic possibilities, a "negative misreading"—one that generates confusion in interpretation and misguides creative practice—poses equally significant risks. Her critique of such negative misreading in the Chinese reception of magical realism exposes a crucial yet often overlooked dimension of cross-cultural literary transmission. Zeng astutely warns that when misreading shifts from "creative reconstruction" to "cognitive disarray", it distorts theoretical exegesis and, through a chain reaction in creative practice, entrenches reductive stereotypes of Latin American literature. The pervasiveness of this phenomenon—extending from general readers to professional critics—reveals a fundamental flaw in cultural mediation: in interpretive frameworks lacking historical depth and political sensitivity, magical realism is easily reduced to an empty signifier of "exotic spectacle" or "ethnic fantasy". Consequently, Zeng's critique functions not merely as a diagnostic of misreading but as a vital methodological reminder for comparative literature: only by situating texts within the concrete historical context of colonial modernity can we prevent misreading from evolving from an

"inevitable" occurrence into an "unforgivable" theoretical violence.

Field-based Hispanicist scholarship has long warned of a persistent misalignment in China's reception of magical realism. As early as 2000, Duan Ruochuan (2000) sounded an explicit caution in The Condor on the Andes: Nobel Prizes and Magical Realism: "For readers unfamiliar with the defining features of magical realism, and for those unacquainted with Latin America's historical, cultural, and religious traditions, distinguishing it from mere fantasy is indeed difficult … Yet the matter is far from simple". This interpretive difficulty is thrown into sharper relief when viewed against the historical backdrop later articulated by Suo Sa (2003). In A Brief History of Latin American Thought, the renowned Chinese scholar of Latin American studies contends that the mid-twentieth century witnessed an "awakening of cultural independence", a movement that championed creativity and foregrounded national spirit. It is precisely within this context, Suo Sa argues, that the national and political dimensions of magical realism become unmistakable.

Therefore, the key to overcoming such misreading lies in re-establishing an organic connection between the text and its historical context. What distinguishes the magical narratives of magical realism from mere fantasy is precisely their anchoring of magical elements within concrete structures of historical violence. The recent rediscovery of the political dimension of magical realism in Chinese academia represents an academic validation of this contextualized reading approach—by juxtaposing Latin American experiences with Chinese historical traumas, scholars have not only demystified the "magic" but also revealed literature's universal potential as a witness to resistance. As Xie Wenxing and Jiang Chengyong (2019) observe:

Magical realist writers delve not only into the depths of Latin American history and culture but also into the very fabric of its social life. They perceive Latin America's reality through Latin American eyes and thought, forging a synthesis of the region's unique natural, social, historical, cultural, and ideological elements. By harmoniously blending indigenous Latin American components with Western modernist techniques, they have not only revealed a reality distinct from classical, romantic, or realist representations but also opened new avenues for literary engagement with reality.

The exemplary significance of this national identity construction lies in its demonstration that literary modernity can emerge organically from indigenous cultural soil rather than being contingent on Western discursive frameworks.

The Chinese writers of the 1980s who drew on magical realism did so precisely because they recognized the dual value of its national core. As Wu Mengyu (2019) demonstrates, for those authors the movement's distinctive traits first endowed folk resources with modernity, allowing them to deconstruct mainstream political ideology; second, they excavated the particularities of national culture within foreign influence, foregrounding the power of mythic consciousness rather than submitting to Western rationalism. Mo Yan's creative practice exemplifies this two-way transformation: he inherits Latin American writers' rational engagement with hybrid cultures while converting his challenge to

native value systems into an impetus for aesthetic reconstruction. Through comparative analysis, Qi Jinhua (2020) shows that García Márquez and Mo Yan share a "gene of rebellious creation": the former constructs a Latin American aesthetic with a "light touch that carries weight", the latter achieves the deconstruction of tradition through an "intensity that magnifies the slight", producing a dialectical unity of "originality and metamorphosis" in their literary production. Such comparison not only uncovers the deep logic of magical realism's national expression but also highlights Chinese writers' theoretical self-awareness in preserving cultural subjectivity amid cross-cultural dialogue.

Chinese scholarship's understanding of magical realism is undergoing a paradigmatic shift from formal aesthetics to socio-historical dimensions, a turn most evident in its renewed appreciation of the dialectical relationship between "magic" and Latin American social reality. Wu Mengyu's (2019) cross-cultural comparative study identifies two critical cognitive dimensions. First, the native Chinese lineage of the marvelous—from ancient myths to Ming-Qing supernatural fiction—has not only provided a psychological foundation for receiving magical realism but also generated a distinctive "digestive capacity". This cultural affinity enables Chinese writers to move beyond mere formal imitation and reconstitute the political potential of magical narratives within their own context. Second, the structural parallels between the social predicaments of 1980s China and 1940s–50s Latin America created an isomorphic space for cognitive mapping, allowing Latin American experience to serve as a unique lens through which to refract Chinese realities. This breakthrough in social cognition dismantles the earlier reductive equation of "magic = fantasy", replacing it with a historically grounded, politically nuanced understanding of the marvelous.

Xie Wenxing and Jiang Chengyong (2019) further clarify the essential nature of magical realism through their critical reading: while most readers are drawn to its magical elements, what appears "marvelous" to the outsider is, in fact, Latin American writers' projection of the inherent magic in their personal experiences and lived realities. This corrective insight was already partially present in China's 1980s Root-Seeking Literature. As Wu Mengyu (2019) observes, what truly unsettled Chinese writers was not the magic itself but the narrative revolution of "unbounded juxtaposition" between the marvelous and the real. By dissolving realism's monopolistic claim on "truth", this strategy allowed suppressed social truths to surface in a surreal dimension. Chinese authors such as Mo Yan and Yu Hua, like their Latin American counterparts, confronted the magical quality of their own realities while using marvelous narratives to reconstruct obscured socio-historical landscapes, thereby completing a paradigmatic leap from "marvelous spectacle" to "critical realism".

This deepening of political consciousness is further reflected in the geopolitical analysis of magical realism's fertile ground. In their critical examination, Xie Wenxing and Jiang Chengyong (2019) reveal that the "reality" underlying the seemingly marvelous narratives of Latin American magical realism is almost always anchored in the region's deep historical and factual foundations. Latin America's cultural history, the lived experiences of its writers, and the texture of everyday life are themselves

saturated with a sense of the marvelous, and the writers' realist portrayals are, to a large extent, acts of illuminating and re-enacting that very marvelousness embedded in lived reality. Miguel Ángel Asturias's creative practice offers a paradigmatic case in point. As Wang Yuan (2020) observes, for Asturias the marvelous tale is never merely a rhetorical device of language and plot; instead, he deploys an uncanny artistry and resonance to convey the magical reality that has unfolded—and continues to unfold—on this land. Moreover, in terms of textual continuity, the "Banana Trilogy" that follows Men of Maize carries forward Asturias's reflections on the social contradictions and value conflicts between post-colonial forces and Indigenous peasants. There is no doubt that Asturias's magical realism is firmly rooted in the soil of lived reality. This "grounded-in-reality" literary practice transforms magical realism into a political weapon for dismantling hegemonic discourses. This represents the most recent scholarly interpretation in China and signals an increasingly comprehensive grasp of the mode.

Reducing magical realism to a simplistic formula of "colonial trauma + indigenous myth" would once again obscure its aesthetic complexity. It is precisely in response to this risk that recent scholarship has turned to the dialectical mechanism of "affective politics" within magical realism, exploring how political critique acquires emotional momentum through embodied experience. Fu Xiaohong's (2024) latest research provides an aesthetic-dialectical foundation for this political reading:

The intricate tension between "history and modernity, sensibility and reason" in Latin American magical realism is not a mere binary opposition; rather, it is mediated through a native affective tradition that crystallizes into the central image of the "affective body". In magical realist cinema, magic and reality are woven into an organic, dialectically unified relationship via this affective body. If the defining ambition of the New Latin American Cinema's neo-baroque phase was to forge new subjects, new cinema, and new utopias, then magical realism accomplishes a comparable aim through the creation of an "affective reality", in which opposites achieve unity and negative and positive affects are rendered isomorphic.

The trajectory of Chinese scholarship on magical realism—from its initial importation as an exotic aesthetic to its current re-framing as a politically charged, historically grounded mode—reveals a epistemological maturation. By dismantling the reductive "magic = fantasy" equation, excavating the geopolitical foundations of the marvelous, and foregrounding the affective body as the site where political critique and aesthetic experience converge, Chinese critics have not only reclaimed the radical potential of magical realism but also reconfigured its global significance. This dual achievement—restoring the Latin American tradition' s historical weight while demonstrating its resonance with Chinese traumas—affirms literature' s capacity to mediate between the particular and the universal, the local and the global.

The corpus of scholarship on magical realism's influence on Chinese writers is already vast. Early Chinese engagements with the mode were inevitably marked by imitation and transplantation, yet as

localized practices matured, an increasing number of works began to exhibit unmistakable originality and cultural self-awareness. By integrating the narrative architectures and symbolic techniques of magical realism with China' s historical traumas, folk beliefs, and regional cultures, writers successfully transcended the confines of the "Latin American model", forging distinctive expressions imbued with unmistakable "Chinese experience" and "Eastern aesthetics". This not only expanded the theoretical boundaries of magical realism but also demonstrated its transformation from a geographically specific literary style into a trans-culturally applicable methodological tool.

The trajectory of magical realism in China—from borrowing and absorption to independent innovation and, ultimately, reverse influence—attests to the mode's capacity to transcend its original Latin American historical and cultural context and assume universal methodological relevance. At a broader level, this evolution significantly enhanced the subjectivity and global influence of Chinese literature. The process directly elevated the visibility and impact of Chinese letters on the world stage, with works by Mo Yan, Su Tong, Yu Hua, Can Xue, and others coming to exemplify what is now widely recognized as "Chinese Magical Realism". Through the formal framework of magical realism, these authors narrate China' s distinctive stories of social transformation, historical trauma, and cultural change, satisfying international readers' appetite for cultural alterity while simultaneously offering profound social critique and humanistic reflection. In doing so, they shattered long-standing stereotypes of Chinese literature abroad as either "political propaganda" or "Oriental spectacle".

Mariano Siskind (2014), in his book Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America, once made the following assessment of the relationship between magical realism and world literature: I suggest that the world literary nature of magical realism should be sought, not in its formal generic traits, but in its concrete global trajectories from the I92os to the I99os and in the traces it leaves behind in the translations and rewritings that make up the literary materiality of its world. Along the lines of the globalization of the novel that I proposed in the previous chapter, here I suggest that the world literary nature of magical realism should be sought, not in its formal generic traits, but in its concrete global trajectories from the I920s to the I990s and in the traces it leaves behind in the translations and rewritings that make up the literary materiality of its world. Thus, the developmental arc of magical realism in the Chinese context—from "borrowing" to "original creation" —constitutes a culturally innovative experiment of significant theoretical and practical value within the globalization of Chinese literature. This process not only expanded the expressive modes and intellectual horizons of Chinese writing but also effectively disrupted the Euro-American and Latin American centrism that has long dominated world-literary geography, underscoring the discursive weight and subjectivity of Chinese literature in contemporary global cultural discourse.

5. Conclusion

As David Damrosch pointed out in his theory of "World Literature", any national literature inevitably undergoes "refraction" in the process of cross-cultural communication. The phenomenon of "refraction" is inevitable in the process of intercultural communication of any national literature. This kind of "refraction" means that once a literary work transcends its original context and is put into a different cultural context, it will inevitably be reinterpreted, selectively absorbed, or even "misread". However, this kind of "misinterpretation" is not a simple understanding deviation or cultural obstacle, but precisely constitutes the most energetic and creative link in the process of cross-cultural flow of literature.

The acceptance and development of magical realism in the Chinese context is a manifestation of this "refraction" mechanism. Although there is inevitably a certain degree of misinterpretation of magical realism by contemporary Chinese writers, especially in terms of weakening its post-colonial historical allegory, national identity anxiety, and political critical function in the Latin American context, it has shown an semantic shift. However, it is precisely this shift and reinterpretation that inspired Chinese writers to make creative transformations based on local cultural resources and realities. They have not only combined the narrative strategy and symbol system of magical realism with China's rich folk beliefs, historical traumas and regional culture, successfully breaking through the limitations of political realism, but also participating in the reshaping of the pluralistic pattern of contemporary world literature through the unique expression of "Oriental magical realism".

From this point of view, China's acceptance of magical realism is not a simple literary imitation or cultural transplantation, but a practice of reinterpretation with the demand of cultural subjectivity. This process has not only enriched the expressive techniques and ideological connotation of contemporary Chinese literature, expanded the space for literary expression of Chinese experience, but also promoted the cross-cultural reconstruction of the ontological structure of magical realism, confirming its openness and vitality as a universal literary methodology.

Therefore, the "refraction" and "reinterpretation" of magical realism in China is not only a concrete embodiment of Chinese literature's response to the trend of globalized literature and the absorption of foreign resources, but also an important way for Chinese writers to reshape their own cultural expression and actively integrate into the world literary system through creative misinterpretation and localized innovation. It is also an important path for Chinese writers to reshape their own cultural expressions through creative misinterpretation and localized innovation, and to actively integrate into the world literary system. This complex process of cross-cultural literary interaction is the real picture of the flow and reconstruction of contemporary world literature.

Acknowledgments

This paper was supported by Jiangsu Provincial University Philosophy and Social Science Research Project (2023SJYB0246)

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