

FROM THE SPATIAL TURN TO GEOGRAPHICAL ONTOLOGY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE LITERARY GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract: This article analyzes the formation and theoretical development of Chinese Literary Geography. It places this field within the global intellectual shift towards spatial analysis, known as the "Spatial Turn." The study outlines a central tension shaping the discipline between two approaches: the "Geographical Perspective," influenced by Western theories of space, power, and representation, and the "Literary Perspective," grounded in traditional Chinese methods of mapping authors and regional literary history. The article follows the field's philosophical progression, noting its move from a human-centered view to a "Geographical Ontology" that emphasizes the fundamental material relationship between people and their environment as a basis for literature. In terms of method, it assesses how Chinese scholars have applied and adapted Western frameworks like Geocriticism, Imaginative Geographies, and digital literary mapping to bridge detailed textual study with broader pattern analysis. The argument concludes that the path forward for Chinese Literary Geography is through a deliberate synthesis of its diverse traditions. This "New Literary Geography" aims to combine empirical research with spatial theory, focusing on the literary text as the core site where geographical reality is constructed and transformed.

Keywords: Chinese Literary Geography; Spatial Turn; Geographical Ontology; Geocriticism, Literary Cartography; Man-earth relationship

1 INTRODUCTION: THE SPATIAL TURN AND THE REORIENTATION OF CRITICAL INQUIRY

The study of humanities in recent decades has been profoundly shaped by a focus on space. This shift moved beyond the traditional priority given to historical analysis. It presented space not as a mere backdrop, but as an active force shaped by society and essential to our understanding of the world. Chinese Literary Geography developed within this global intellectual context, which fundamentally reexamined the importance of spatial concepts.

1.1 The Hegemony of Time and the Nineteenth-Century Legacy

In the modern era, and especially during the nineteenth century, the primary focus of intellectual thought was history. As the philosopher Michel Foucault observed, history was the "great obsession." Scholars were concerned with ideas of development, evolution, and progress through time. This perspective was shaped by powerful intellectual currents like Hegel's philosophy of historical change and Darwin's theory of evolution. In this climate, time was considered the most important dimension for understanding the world. This emphasis on time deeply influenced literary studies. A key example is the work of Hippolyte Taine and his influential *History of English Literature*, published in 1863 [1]. Taine proposed that literature could be explained by three factors: race, milieu, and moment. Although "milieu" suggests a concern with environment or place, it was largely treated as a static physical setting. It was the unchanging stage for the main action, which was the historical "moment." In this view, space was seen as fixed and lifeless, while time was dynamic and generative.

This historical approach placed geography in a secondary role. It was seen as a passive backdrop or a simple limitation, not an active force that helps shape culture and literature. The prevailing "spirit of the times" held far more power than any "spirit of a place." The story of human advancement was understood almost exclusively as a journey forward through time.

1.2 The Insurrection of Space: Foucault, Lefebvre, and Soja

This focus on history began to change in the middle of the twentieth century. By the 1970s and 1980s, new postmodern theories brought space to the center of attention. The philosopher Michel Foucault famously declared that while the nineteenth century was obsessed with history, "the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space" [2]. He suggested that our contemporary world is defined less by progress through time and more by the arrangement of things in space—their connections, their networks, and their coexistence.

Foucault introduced the idea of the "heterotopia." These are real spaces that operate differently from their surroundings. They are counter-sites that reflect, challenge, or overturn the norms of everyday society. For scholars of literature, this idea became a valuable tool. It helped them see how texts can create alternative worlds that question dominant cultural stories. At the same time, Henri Lefebvre was reshaping how we understand space. In his major work, *The Production of Space*, he argued that space is not simply an empty container [3]. Instead, it is something actively created by social

activity and human relationships. He described a three-part model for understanding any space, which has become essential for literary geography.

First, there is spatial practice. This is the physical space we perceive and move through in our daily routines. Second, there are representations of space. This is space as it is conceived and mapped by experts like planners and scientists. Third, there are representational spaces. This is the space as it is directly lived and imagined through art, symbols, and personal experience. Lefebvre's model allowed literary critics to see a text not just as a picture of a place, but as an active participant in creating social meaning. A novel or poem functions as a "representational space" that shapes how we understand our world.

Building on this foundation, the geographer Edward Soja further developed this spatial thinking [4]. He criticized the overemphasis on history in social theory and argued for a renewed focus on space. His concept of "Thirdspace" became particularly influential [5]. Thirdspace is the idea that a place can be both real and imagined at the same time. It is both a physical location and a product of meaning, memory, and metaphor. For literary study, this means that a fictional place like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County is not simply invented. Nor is it just a documentary copy of the real American South. It exists in a Thirdspace, where the author's geographical imagination reshapes our understanding of the material world.

1.3 The Emergence of Literary Geography in China

This new focus on space, which moved beyond seeing environment as a fixed setting to understanding it as something actively created, provided the foundation for Chinese Literary Geography to establish itself as a distinct field. The discipline draws from a deep native tradition. This includes ancient works like the Book of Songs, where poems were organized according to the region, or "Guo Feng," from which they came. However, its modern form is a deliberate project. It seeks to blend this longstanding Chinese scholarly tradition with the Western theories of space that emerged in the late twentieth century.

Leading scholars in China, such as Mei Xinlin, advocate for a "New Literary Geography" [6]. Their goal is to move past simple contrasts between Chinese and Western thought or between ancient and modern approaches. Instead, they aim to build a unified theoretical framework. This framework combines two key perspectives. The first is the "Literary Perspective," which examines the historical patterns of where authors lived and where literary works originated. The second is the "Geographical Perspective," which investigates how space is represented within the texts themselves and the spatial logic that governs those representations.

This study will examine the development of this field. It will analyze the fundamental shifts in how space and literature are understood, the new research methods that have been adopted, and the key discussions currently shaping Chinese Literary Geography as an academic discipline.

2 DEFINING THE DISCIPLINE: DIVERGENT PARADIGMS AND THE QUEST FOR INTEGRATION

The definition of Literary Geography is not fixed or uniform. It is a field shaped by debate, with different researchers holding distinct views on what constitutes knowledge and where the focus of study should lie. A close examination of the discipline shows a significant split in approach. Scholars like Dai Juncheng have framed this as a dichotomy between the Western "Geographical Perspective" and the Chinese "Literary Perspective."

2.1 The "Geographical Perspective": Western Trajectories

Literary geography in the Western academic tradition has followed a clear path of development. Scholars such as Marc Brosseau have identified several distinct phases in its evolution, each grounded in different theoretical perspectives [7,8]. These phases are often linked to broader trends within human and cultural geography.

The first phase, active before the 1960s, can be called the Phase of Regional Realism [9]. During this period, literary works were used mainly as sources of information. Influenced by geographers like Carl Sauer and his idea of the "cultural landscape" [10], researchers treated novels and poetry as archives of factual detail. They extracted descriptions of terrain, weather, and local customs to add richness to their maps and regional studies. In this view, literature was a passive reflection of a real, external world, and its artistic value was secondary to its descriptive utility.

A significant shift occurred in the 1970s with the Phase of Humanistic Geography. This approach turned away from mere description and focused on human experience. Drawing from phenomenology and thinkers like Gaston Bachelard, scholars studied the deep emotional connections people form with places [11]. Concepts like "sense of place" and "topophilia" became central. Bachelard's work, for example, examined how intimate spaces like a house hold profound personal meaning and shape memory. Literary geography in this phase became an exploration of how writing captures the feeling of belonging and the personal significance of environments.

The 1980s introduced a more politically engaged perspective in the Phase of Radical and Marxist Geography. Inspired by theorists like David Harvey, scholars began to analyze the economic and power structures that shape space [12]. Harvey's concept of "time-space compression" helped explain how literature might reflect the speeding up and shrinking of the world under modern capitalism. Here, a literary text was understood as a product of its social and material context. Researchers examined how stories reveal or challenge spatial injustices, class conflict, and unequal development across cities and regions.

Finally, from the 1990s to the present, the Phase of New Cultural Geography has dominated. This phase incorporates

insights from post-structuralism, feminism, and post-colonial studies. It places great emphasis on power, identity, and representation. Scholars like Mike Crang see literature not as a mirror but as an active participant in creating meaning [13]. A text is viewed as a network that constructs our understanding of space, rather than just describing it. This distinctly "Geographical Perspective" of the discipline asks how writing assigns meaning to landscapes and how it is used to express ideas about gender, race, and national identity.

2.2 The "Literary Perspective": Chinese Trajectories

The dominant Chinese approach, termed the "Literary Perspective," differs from the Western focus. Led by scholars like Zeng Daxing and Yang Yi, it places greater emphasis on the concrete patterns of literary activity and on the historical relationship between literature and the physical world. Zeng Daxing is a leading theorist who defines the field through three core areas of study [14].

The first is Geographical Distribution. This involves a statistical and historical analysis of where literary elements are found [15]. Researchers map the native places where authors were born, the places they traveled to, and the locations where cultural centers thrived. This creates a spatial record of literary production. The second area is Regionality [16]. This examines the distinctive characteristics of literature from different areas. It explores how specific environments, such as the water towns of Jiangnan compared to the loess plateau of the Northwest, give rise to unique literary styles, forms, and artistic schools. The third is Interaction. This investigates the two-way relationship between literature and the geographical environment [17]. Zeng suggests a "mechanism of trigger," where physical landscapes and objects stimulate a writer's awareness and emotions, which then finds expression in their creative work.

Yang Yi contributes to this paradigm by advocating for a "remapping" of Chinese literature. He argues the discipline's core purpose is to reconnect writing with the "spirit of the earth." His work analyzes large-scale cultural movements, like the historical southward shift of China's cultural center, and explores how the experience of exile has shaped the literary mindset. His research highlights the profound link between regional culture and a writer's identity [18].

Mei Xinlin builds upon these foundations with his proposal for a "New Literary Geography." He aims to organize these various approaches into a structured academic discipline. He outlines four essential pillars: Concept, Discipline, Theory, and Method. For methodology, he recommends combining distribution studies and trajectory research, which tracks writers' movements, with fixed-point research, which involves deep analysis of specific locations. His vision represents a push for greater "disciplinary self-consciousness," with the goal of establishing Literary Geography as a formal field of study with a status equal to that of Literary History.

2.3 Integration and Conflict

This clear distinction between the two approaches—one centered on textual meaning and power in space, and the other on historical patterns and environmental effects—creates a foundational tension. Yet, it also presents a significant opportunity for growth. Scholar Cao Shitu has attempted to build a connection between them [19]. He defines the discipline as the study of the dynamic relationship between literature and geography. This definition intentionally includes both the traditional Chinese idea of literature's "wind-soil" character, shaped by local environment, and the spatial principles that govern its changes across different areas.

Looking ahead, the primary challenge for Chinese Literary Geography is to achieve a synthesis. The field must find a way to combine the detailed, evidence-based methods of its "Literary Perspective" with the interpretive depth and conceptual frameworks of the Western "Geographical Perspective." The future path involves using Western spatial theory not as a replacement, but as a lens to examine and bring new understanding to the immense historical record of Chinese literature. Success in this integration will determine the discipline's maturity and its unique contribution to global scholarship.

3 THEORETICAL CORE: FROM "HUMAN ONTOLOGY" TO "GEOGRAPHICAL ONTOLOGY"

A significant theoretical evolution within Chinese Literary Geography involves a proposed change in its fundamental perspective. This evolution suggests moving from an understanding centered on the author or the literary subject to one centered on geography itself. This shift grapples with core philosophical questions about what literature essentially is and about the connection between the individual who writes and the world they inhabit.

This means that instead of asking primarily about an author's life or intentions, the focus turns toward the role of place. The key inquiry becomes how geography actively shapes literary creation, meaning, and form. This perspective suggests that the essence of a literary work is not found solely within the writer's mind, but emerges from a dynamic engagement with a specific environment, history, and cultural landscape. It reframes the relationship, seeing the writer not just as an independent creator imposing meaning onto a passive world, but as a participant within a geographical context that profoundly influences and enables their creative expression.

3.1 The Dominance of "Human Ontology"

Since the 1980s, the theoretical landscape of Chinese literature has been heavily influenced by "Human Ontology" (*Renxue Bentilun*). This trend was catalyzed by Liu Zaifu's seminal essay "On the Subjectivity of Literature" [20]. Writing in the context of the post-Cultural Revolution thaw, Liu argued for the liberation of literature from rigid

political determinism. He emphasized the centrality of human subjectivity—agency, will, creativity, and inner strength. Literature was redefined as the "poetic displacement of human internal nature," focusing on the exploration of the self and the "inner universe" of the subject.

The human-centered approach advocated by Liu was an important step forward. It corrected the earlier, simpler view that literature was only a mirror of social and political conditions. However, critics such as Yuan Xun contend that this approach eventually fostered a form of "anthropocentric arrogance." By concentrating entirely on the human individual, this perspective broke the essential connection between literature and the external, natural world. It came to see the environment only as a passive background for human action or as a screen for projecting human feelings. In doing so, it failed to account for the real and significant ways the physical world shapes and limits human experience and creativity.

3.2 The Proposition of "Geographical Ontology"

To correct this imbalance, scholars proposing a "Geographical Ontology" base their argument on the materialist philosophy of Karl Marx. Specifically, they draw from his early work, *the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* [21]. Scholar Yuan Xun uses this foundation to present a materialist critique of the human-centered approach. He highlights Marx's statements that a person "can only express his life by means of real, sensible objects," and that a human is "a natural, corporeal, sensible, objective being... a passive, conditioned, and limited being." This perspective places the relationship between "Man and Earth" at the center of human existence. According to this view, there are three key principles.

First is our Dependence on Nature. Human life is fundamentally reliant on the natural world. We are not pure spirits, but physical beings whose very existence is shaped by our environment. Second is the principle of Objectification. Literary creation is not simply the outpouring of an inner mind. It is the process of turning natural reality into an object, such as a poem or novel. The external world is the necessary material and starting point for any creative act. Third is the acknowledgment of human Limitations. Unlike the idea of unlimited human freedom, the geographical perspective recognizes that humans are also passive and finite. Literature arises from the interaction between human creative will and the real constraints of the environment.

Zou Jianjun has expanded this idea [22]. He argues that the fundamental "Man-Earth" relationship is the base for all other connections in literature. This includes the "Writer-Earth" relationship, which examines how geography shapes the author, and the "Text-Earth" relationship, which analyzes how a literary work represents place. In this framework, literature is redefined. It is not merely "the study of man," but rather "the study of man in the world." This restores the geographical dimension to a central position within literary theory.

4 METHODOLOGIES: CARTOGRAPHY, CRITICISM, AND IMAGINATION

The methods used by scholars in Chinese Literary Geography have grown more varied and sophisticated. This expansion is largely due to the thoughtful adoption and adaptation of theories developed in the West. Three specific methodological approaches have become especially important for analysis within the field. These are Geocriticism, the study of Imaginative Geographies, and the practice of Literary Cartography. Each provides a distinct set of tools for examining the relationship between literature and place.

4.1 Geocriticism: From Egocentrism to Geocentrism

Bertrand Westphal established the method known as "Geocriticism" [23]. His approach fundamentally shifts focus away from the author. Westphal argues that traditional literary study is too limited, concentrating either on the author's life or on the text in isolation. In contrast, he proposes "Geocentrism." This means placing the primary emphasis on the location itself, which becomes a focal point where many different depictions converge.

Westphal's method relies on two main concepts. The first is Multifocalization. Instead of examining one author's portrayal of a place, geocriticism gathers and compares many representations of the same location from various authors, time periods, and cultural perspectives. For example, it would study Paris not just through Balzac's novels, but also through the works of Zola, Proust, and later immigrant writers. This leads to the second concept, Stratigraphy. By layering these multiple representations, we see the place as an accumulation of cultural meaning over time, much like geological strata. Each literary text adds a new layer to our understanding of a city or landscape. Westphal also emphasizes Polysensoriality. This means paying attention to how literature evokes all the senses—not just sight, but also sound, smell, and touch—to build a full experience of a space, moving beyond a simple visual map. Furthermore, he highlights Transgression. Drawing on philosophical ideas about boundaries, geocriticism explores how literature crosses and blurs lines. It examines how texts can challenge fixed identities of places, redefine what is central or marginal, and reimagine the connections between different spaces.

Robert Tally Jr., a prominent scholar who explains and applies Westphal's ideas, strengthens this view [24]. He describes the writer as a kind of mapmaker, engaged in "literary cartography" [25]. For Tally, geocriticism is essentially a way to read the "spatiality" within a text, analyzing how the very structure of a story organizes, creates, and gives meaning to space.

4.2 Imaginative Geographies: Power, Knowledge, and the Other

The concept of "Imaginative Geographies," developed by Edward Said, offers a powerful method for examining how space, power, and representation are connected. Said proposed that the way we understand geography is not neutral. It is an imaginative creation that often supports specific political or ideological goals. In his influential work *Orientalism*, he showed how Western writers and scholars constructed a vision of "the East." They created a binary division, positioning their own lands as rational and civilized, while depicting Eastern societies as irrational and exotic [26]. This imaginative geography, supported by a structure of power, was used to justify colonial rule and domination. Later scholars have expanded this framework. Derek Gregory applied it to analyze what he calls the "colonial present" [27]. By studying travel narratives and colonial era literature, he demonstrates how a "geographical imagination" is used to define and script foreign places, like Egypt or Afghanistan, in ways that make military or political intervention seem necessary and legitimate [28-31].

Another scholar, Joanne Sharp, contributes to this method by examining the process of "demystification" [32]. In her critique of Roland Barthes' writings on Japan, she argues that reducing a complex culture to a collection of artistic signs is itself a form of "geographical violence" [33]. This approach, which she calls "hyper-Orientalism," strips a place of its political and social reality. Sharp instead advocates for a "remystification" that acknowledges the agency and inherent complexity of the other culture, rather than attempting to fully explain or define it.

Within Chinese literary studies, this methodology of Imaginative Geographies is actively used. It provides a lens to analyze enduring cultural divisions, such as the literary contrast between North and South China. It is also applied to study the representation of border regions like Xinjiang and Tibet in literature, and to understand the dynamics of self and other in literary encounters between China and the West.

4.3 Literary Cartography: The Digital and Quantitative Turn

Franco Moretti transformed literary studies with his ideas about "Literary Cartography" and "Distant Reading." He argued that the conventional method of closely analyzing a small selection of classic texts is not adequate for understanding literature as a vast, interconnected global system. In response, he proposed "distant reading." This approach uses large collections of data to identify broad patterns and trends across literary history. In his book *Atlas of the European Novel*, Moretti demonstrated this by creating maps to trace how the novel spread, to show where certain plot types were common, and to follow the geographic movements of characters within stories [34,35].

This methodology has inspired a wider "Digital Turn" in the twenty-first century. Researchers now employ Geographic Information Systems and other digital mapping tools to visualize literary information. These techniques allow for precise examination of patterns, such as the travel routes of authors, the concentration of literary activity in certain cities, and how the emotional tone of literature might vary from one region to another. Nevertheless, scholars like Wang Yixuan point out a significant challenge. The danger is that this quantitative, map-based abstraction can overshadow the detailed qualitative experience of an individual literary work. The key for the digital turn is to maintain a balance, ensuring that the aesthetic particularity and unique texture of literature itself are not lost in the process of creating large-scale models and visualizations.

5 THE CHINESE CONTEXT: SYNTHESIS AND THE CONFLICT OF PERSPECTIVES

The growth of Chinese Literary Geography represents an active and critical engagement with global thought, not a simple adoption of Western ideas. It is a deliberate process of combining different scholarly traditions. The project to build a "New Literary Geography" specifically seeks to merge the detailed, evidence-based methods long practiced in Chinese studies with the analytical frameworks developed in Western spatial theory. This synthesis aims to create a distinct and robust academic discipline that speaks to both local literary history and broader theoretical conversations.

5.1 The "New Literary Geography" System

Mei Xinlin provides a clear framework for this combined approach. He describes a future disciplinary structure built upon four essential components.

The first component is Concept. This involves creating a shared vocabulary that brings together Western ideas like heterotopia and thirdspace with traditional Chinese concepts such as fengtu (local character) and diqi (spirit of the earth). The second is Discipline. This pillar calls for formally establishing Literary Geography as a primary field of study, with a status equal to that of Literary History. This institutional recognition affirms that space is as vital as time for understanding literature. The third is Theory. Here, the goal is to develop original theories rooted in the Chinese context. Examples include the "Genealogy of Literary Families" and "Geographical Ontology," which aim to explain the unique patterns and forces shaping Chinese literary creation. The fourth is Method. This advocates for a blended methodology. It pairs the traditional Chinese practice of "evidential research," which focuses on verifying historical facts, with modern techniques like spatial analysis and digital cartography.

5.2 The Conflict: Literary Perspective vs. Geographical Perspective

A clear tension persists within the field, identified by scholars like Dai Juncheng, between what is termed the "Literary Perspective" and the "Geographical Perspective."

The Literary Perspective, championed by scholars such as Zeng Daxing, concentrates on the concrete patterns of

literary activity. It is primarily concerned with empirical questions: Where were authors born? Where did they travel and write? This approach, grounded in a tradition of historical materialist analysis, uses maps and statistical data to build what might be called the factual skeleton of literary history.

In contrast, the Geographical Perspective, shaped by the adaptation of Western theorists like Marc Brosseau, focuses on how space is portrayed and given meaning within literary works. It asks interpretive questions: How does a text construct its sense of place? What relationships of power are embedded in this representation? This approach is fundamentally analytical, often drawing on post-structuralist thought to critique the cultural and political dimensions of spatial description.

This divergence defines a central methodological debate, between mapping the external facts of literary production and interpreting the internal construction of space within the text itself.

5.3 The Textual Path as Synthesis

In response to this conflict, Zou Jianjun proposes a mediating "Textual Path." He cautions against two potential pitfalls. The first is allowing the field to become purely sociological, where literature is reduced to mere data points. The second is allowing it to become purely geographical, where a literary work is treated only as a documentary record of a place. Zou's "Textual Path" asserts that the literary text itself must remain the central focus of study.

He builds upon Michel Collot's observation about geocriticism. Zou argues that while a place-centered approach is valuable, it should not come at the cost of ignoring the author's individual perspective or the unique aesthetic qualities of the work. The essential task for Literary Geography, in his view, is to examine precisely how a text transforms real-world geography into a distinct "literary space." This requires close attention to the tools of writing, such as narrative form, metaphor, and imagery, as well as to the reader's own lived experience of the world the text creates [36].

6 CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF THE DISCIPLINE

The trajectory of Chinese Literary Geography demonstrates a remarkable evolution from a marginal subfield to a robust, self-conscious discipline. By navigating the shift from the nineteenth-century hegemony of time to the postmodern "Spatial Turn," Chinese scholars have opened new horizons for literary inquiry.

The future of the discipline lies in the deepening of this synthesis.

First, the theoretical core of "Geographical Ontology" offers a profound philosophical basis for the discipline, grounding literary study in the material reality of the "Man-Earth" relationship. This resonates with the global turn towards the Environmental Humanities and Ecocriticism.

Second, the methodological integration of Geocriticism, Imaginative Geographies, and Literary Cartography provides a sophisticated toolkit for analyzing the complex interplay of space, power, and representation.

Third, the Digital Humanities offer unprecedented opportunities to bridge the "Literary Perspective" and the "Geographical Perspective." GIS technologies allow for the visualization of vast datasets regarding writer distribution (the Literary Perspective), while also enabling new forms of "distant reading" that reveal the spatial structures of narrative (the Geographical Perspective).

Ultimately, Chinese Literary Geography is moving towards a unified dialectic where space is understood as both a material reality and a textual construction, and where the map and the territory are read together in a "Thirdspace" of critical inquiry.

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