The political novel enjoyed a steep, short, and international career between the 1830s and the first decade of the twentieth century. This period saw a sharp increase in the international spread of goods, ideas, concepts, institutions, and practices. It was facilitated by greatly improved forms of communication through steamships and telegraph lines, and fueled by the global travel of workers, entertainers, globetrotters, and revolutionists. The result was a rapid, massive, and interrelated worldwide change, internally in political institutions and externally in the relations between peoples, societies, and nations.

The political novel is directly and consciously linked to these changes, and it was used as an instrument of public advocacy to influence their direction. The new genre was not the first to discover the advocacy potential of the novel. It followed the lead of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress to Salvation Directed* (1678) as well as efforts since the end of the eighteenth century by the Protestant inland and foreign missions to counter the salacious stories in British chapbooks and their immoral counterparts elsewhere with Christian novels. It was believed that ideas translated into plot and story and embodied by human protagonists would be easier to grasp in their real-life dimension and more effective in changing the hearts and minds of the people. Chinese poetry and drama also had a long and rich tradition of using literary means to discuss political issues and even confront the powers-that-be. From the seventeenth century this potential was also seen in the novel, and by the nineteenth century
Christian missionaries, government loyalists, and Taiping Christian rebels all produced advocacy fiction.¹

The new genre of the political novel was first used by Benjamin Disraeli, from about 1844 before his political rise, to outline for a wider public the political changes that he thought England needed to avoid the type of turmoil that had shaken the Continent since the 1830s and to demonstrate which social forces might bring these changes about. The form was quickly adapted by political reformers on the Continent (Italy, France, Germany). By the 1870s politicians in the Far East who were pushing for political reform to meet the Western challenge (first in Japan, then in the Philippines, China, Korea, and Vietnam) began adopting what they saw as a medium that had shown efficacy in Europe.

Liang Qichao (1873–1929) introduced the genre and demonstrated its potential in China in 1898 after the coup that ended the Hundred Days Reform and forced him into exile. He referred with admiration to the public impact such novels had had in the Japanese and European reforms. European and American politicians, he said, had written such novels to spread their reform ideas in times of national crisis. Japanese reformers had adopted the idea, translated some of these works, and written new ones. Because of the unique power of the novel to emotionally engage and influence the reader, the publication of such works by famous politicians time and again changed the mind-set of a whole country. As compared to the popular but unsavory traditional Chinese novels, he referred to these political novels as “reformed” or “new” novels, xin xiaoshuo 新小説.

Given the priority of the advocacy function, the genre was in each case adjusted to the local and personal agenda. Although all novels can be said to have a social context and function, this context is embedded in the time and place of their creation. It ranges from a link so close that the work will be incomprehensible or irrelevant for readers at another place or a different date to an enduring quality and independence of locality that allows the work to remain relevant and readable for nonacademic readers over long and even very long stretches of time. In the case of the political

¹. For the novels by China missionaries from the years 1810 to 1840, see Hanan, “Missionary Novels”; for the government loyalists, see the discussion of Quell the Bandits (1853) in David Wang, Fin-de-Siècle Splendor, pp. 124–39; for the Taipings, see Hong Rengan, Yingjie gui zhen.
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novel, the explicit connections to the political issues, debates, and personalities of the place and time of the action might account for both the success and the limited timeline of the genre. For the genre to migrate to other linguistic, historical, and political environments through translations or new creations, a perceived similarity of political context and potential function must be assumed. Only such a perception would energize the agency of translators and authors.

The political novel is not alone in having such close links to the political and institutional environment. The high-temperature environment, for example, of China’s transition from empire to nation amidst civil war, conflicts with foreign powers, and revolution between 1850 and the 1920s resulted in a fusion where even genres with a relative autonomy from politics, such as the new detective story or some forms of poetry, were drawn into the political reform debate. In a critical departure from the widely shared assumption among literary scholars that a political agenda can only have a detrimental effect on writing, I will explore whether the political novel might have owed its ascendancy to the promise it carried as a potent instrument of literary advocacy; whether the requirements of advocacy drove the writers not just when crafting the content, but also in their literary interventions; and whether the popularity of the political novel played a role in reconfiguring the local standing of the fictional genre more generally.

The choice of the novel over other literary forms of higher cultural status such as poetry or the essay reflects the desire by writers to capitalize on the already established popularity of the novel form, which was moving from lowly entertainment to the new global leading literary genre. Liang Qichao was quite explicit when he defined the novel as the “highest of literature’s vehicles” (wenxue zhi zuishang cheng 文學之最上乘).2 The use of the Buddhist term “vehicle” indicates the salvationist agenda to which he was to harness the novel. In China as elsewhere the world genre of the political novel was primarily formed through the agency of aspiring political reformers rather than that of fiction writers devoted to their craft.

The study of such a world genre faces major challenges beyond the evident quandary of having to deal with the different languages and contexts of the works in question. How is one to define the identity of such a world genre? Does it maintain this identity as it crosses borders, and

how is this done? What are the dynamics driving the translingual and transcultural appropriation of its forms? Where is the agency in these dynamics? What role does its global spread play in its local presentation? What strategies were used to insert the genre effectively into the local literary and political context? What are the social, economic, and political conditions in the local public sphere (literacy levels, publication outlets, censorship) in which the genre must unfold its effects? What is the relationship between political and literary considerations in the writing and reading of these novels? What are the specific mechanisms through which the genre interacts with the political environment and with other forms of political articulation? Does the use of the genre in different national contexts signal an understanding that these political contexts themselves were becoming—or were supposed to become—more similar in a wider historical move toward “modernity”? What has been the impact of this type of widely read advocacy fiction on the standing and perceived purpose of fiction more generally? These are some of the most pressing questions that this study will try to address.

Fortunately, the political novel is a field manageable enough to allow for engaging with some of these challenges. The present study started off with a focus on the Chinese political novel in the early twentieth century. The intrinsic structure of the available record as well as Chinese claims of the genre’s importance in the political reforms in the West and Japan, however, required an approach that does not banish these worldwide connections into footnotes but fully explores them.

Yet there is little in the available scholarly literature to go by. Like other forms of agenda-driven fiction, the political novel has largely been written out of the various national histories of literature as being of little enduring value.3 The Chinese political novel in particular has been cast

3. The dismissal of agenda-driven fiction from the literary canon has itself become a transculturally shared feature. In Japan the polemics about the place of the political novel in the history of literature started with Tsubouchi Shōyō’s influential 1885 critique in his “Essence of the Novel.” Tsubouchi, who had previously written a political novel himself, claimed that “it is wrong to regard political allegories as the main theme of the novel (shōsetsu).” The preface to the third part of the political novel Kajin no kigū (Mysterious encounters with beautiful women) in 1886 countered: “The novelist’s goal is not to play with exquisite devices or describe customs and human emotions; it is to demonstrate opinions and principles and to smoothly shape people’s views—in other words, the goal lies outside the text.” Both quoted in Asukai, “Seiji shōsetsu,” p. 76.
and decried by recent Chinese scholarship as the ancestor of a literature that is “to serve the politics” of the party/state so that even authors who concede its impact have not felt the need for further study.\(^4\) The dynamics of the formation and development of such world genres, furthermore, are not in the purview of histories of literatures that operate with the nation-state default mode. At the same time, political historians have excluded the political novel from their body of bona fide sources because it belongs to the genre of fiction. My study must therefore go the whole way from establishing the primary source record of the genre to analyzing the literary devices and political implications of its most important works to sketching its dynamics as a world genre.

This work connects with wider challenges to inherited literary scholarship. In their early volumes on the rise of modern literatures in Asia (1965–70), Prague scholars have shown the close structural similarity in the shifts of different Asian literatures to modern and global literary forms and hierarchies without, however, addressing the transcultural interaction among them and other literatures.\(^5\) In a critical dialogue with a “comparative literature” approach, Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, David Damrosch, and others have sketched the outlines and the dynamics of literature as interconnected strands in a world literature.\(^6\) Both Moretti and Casanova highlight asymmetrical interactions between core and periphery, but they differ in their assessment of the underlying dynamics: Moretti sees them as derived from asymmetries in economic strength and political power, whereas Casanova points to the disjuncture between the importance of Paris as the capital of the world republic of letters between 1920 and 1960, on the one hand, and the marginal economic and cultural power of France during this period, on the other. As a consequence, she locates the agency in this elevation of Paris not in imperial imposition

\(^4\) Yuan Jin, Zhongguo wenxue de jindai biange, pp. 159–70; Chen Pingyuan, Ershi shiji, vol. 1, p. 7. It does not seem fruitful to further explore the problem of a “eurocentric” set of concepts and methodologies versus presumably authentic “Asian” notions because most Asian literary scholarship has long absorbed and adapted the “eurocentric” set. For such a line of study, see Yingjin Zhang, China in a Polycentric World, especially the essays by Yingjin Zhang, “Engaging Chinese Comparative Literature,” and David Palumbo-Liu, “Utopias of Discourse.”

\(^5\) Král, Černá, et al., Contributions.

\(^6\) Casanova, République mondiale; Moretti, “Conjectures.”
but in the desire of writers from elsewhere to be part of its literary scene. This point will be taken up in my discussion of the agency driving the dynamics of the world genre of the political novel.

David Damrosch has argued that with translation works of literature “cease to be the exclusive products of their original culture” and “become works that only ‘began’ in their original language.” Pursuing this argument further, I will explore what role such translations played in their new environment that allowed them to be perceived as models to be emulated.

The world genre of the political novel was formed as part of a general process of transcultural interaction. The budding field of transcultural studies therefore deals with processes related to our endeavour and might offer concepts, approaches, and methodological tools of use for this study. An earlier narrative shared by anthropologists had subsumed transcultural interactions under the category of “acculturation,” with one culture becoming acculturated by another that was marked as “higher.” This approach fails to take into account the substantial changes human beings and their cultural products undergo as they interact with other people and cultures, and it reduces the agency involved in local adaptations and re-creations to mere imitation. In a radical reversal of this approach, Fernando Ortiz suggested the term “transculturation” to describe the creative cultural hybridity seen in Cuba even in a situation where foreign interests were dominating the economy and the state institutions. This approach suggests that local “pull” rather than “push” by a superior power is the principal factor driving such interactions. The situation he describes, however, might be peculiar to this island, and he does not address the ways in which the historical actors themselves understood this process. I will probe the location of the agency that makes the political novel into a world genre and the motivation of the agents involved.

For the study of the genre’s identity, I have benefited from efforts to identify the narrative core of folk tales as they migrate across cultures and languages. Although these studies focus on protagonist types and plot elements rather than on plot engines and formal features of the narrative, their basic strategy to constitute the identity of the tale seems adaptable

8. Ortiz, Cuban Counterpoint.
to my purposes. It consists of locating shared core elements in actual narratives with often widely diverging surface features. We will then have to confront the problem that the link between political novels and the name of the genre is unstable. Some of them are announced as such, others not, and still others are announced as such but do not fit the pattern.

Instead of imposing one theoretical construct or the other, I thus propose to extract from historical literary practice the core elements of the political novel. As such a hermeneutic approach defines its field and its sources based on the perception and practices of the historical protagonists, it will follow them wherever they go. This approach will define its own purpose as analyzing the dynamics of the transcultural process this involves and will do so by reading given works and their context against the background of other works of the genre as well as other forms of public articulation that have gone into their matrix. It involves comparison of the way in which different authors—who are writing in their particular contexts and languages what they see as a genre actually connected across different languages and cultures—make their individual contribution. In studying the political novel, rather than making a comparison of random samples, I am pursuing an analysis of works inherently and explicitly linked to a common “world” genre. It is an approach that critically differs from established comparative literature approaches by accepting the premise that transcultural interaction is not a recent phenomenon, but the lifeline of culture altogether, and by thus refusing to go along with the reification of linguistic and cultural borders for purposes of subsequent comparison.¹⁰

This study contains two parts. The first tracks the process through which an identifiable core of the political novel formed and developed, and through which it became a world genre. Chapter 1 sets the stage by investigating whether in the early European and American exemplars core literary features of the genre can be identified that will remain key markers of works in this genre no matter what language they are written in. Chapter 2 focuses on the migration of the political novel to East Asia, in particular Japan and China. It tests the stability of the core features

¹⁰. This discussion is informed by the approach of the “Cluster of Excellence” titled “Asia and Europe in a Global Context: Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows” at Heidelberg University, Germany, which offered me a year of hospitality and stimulating discussions.
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under the manifold concrete forms the novels assume locally and probes the dynamics of genre migration.

The second part investigates how the genre was inserted into the Chinese environment and then reconfigured in interaction with the local literary and political context. Chapter 3 develops the argument that literary form rather than simply content is carrying new ideas across linguistic and cultural borders. It studies Chinese translations of Japanese political novels to sketch the dynamics and the agents driving the migration of literary forms and the process of their local insertion. In a critical departure from previous scholarship, it reads these translations as integral parts of the Chinese-language fiction. The selection of texts for translation and the ways in which their narrative strategies and topical elements were inserted as innovative elements into the Chinese context serve as evidence for the particular creative energy and agency that made them into Chinese texts. Examples from Chinese political novels show how these forms were adapted.

Chapter 4 tests the validity of the prevailing view that the late Qing novel in general and the political novel in particular are a new kind of societal articulation that disassociates itself from and is opposed to court discourse. Starting out from the synchronicity between the two most important court reform edicts of 1901 and of 1906 and the two corresponding peaks in novel publication as well as the close connection between the thematic foci, I present evidence that Qing political novels were inserting themselves into the court-set agenda without, however, losing their leeway as independent articulations outside of the court’s control.

Chapter 5 takes up the novels dealing with an area which the court was most hesitant to reform: women’s standing in the public and the family, their relationship with men, and their education. While the independent stance of the novels here is most marked, the chapter explores how the authors—including the women authors—largely kept within the broad reform agenda of the court by emphasizing women’s potential contributions to the development of the country. They also shared the anxieties prompting the court attitude by having their otherwise exceedingly daring, radical, and modern heroines abide by very traditional norms of chastity.

Chapter 6 follows the literary strategies used by Chinese authors to achieve their ultimate goal—a transformation of the political mind-set of
the Chinese people. For this purpose they offered portrayals of persons who might serve as positive or negative models. On the basis of their portraits of new model figures (the political reformer, the scientist, the detective, and the anarchist revolutionary), I show the behavioral features seen as optimal for a new China as well as the relationship of the value system in which these new model figures were anchored to what was seen as typical Chinese forms of behavior.

The final chapter deals with a unique feature of Chinese political novels not found in any of its models, the “wedge chapter” at the beginning, a recast feature from earlier Chinese drama and fiction that is set off from the rest through its largely independent allegorical coding. I explore the connection between the addition of this new feature and authors’ assessment of the political maturity of their envisaged readers as well as the ways in which authors handled the tension between the traditional form and purpose of the wedge, on the one hand, and the new evolutionist plot engine coming with the political novel, on the other.

Throughout this study I use the term “reformer” to refer to Chinese participants in the literary movement of the political novel or the new novel. This assumption is based on the subject matter they address in their work and/or the kind of journal they publish in. Most of them were not professional fiction writers, but also wrote in other media, often on the same topics. With the founding of the Republic, or more precisely the opening of the Provincial Political Assembly in 1909–10, most of them abandoned writing political novels and ran for election as the opportunity presented itself. No clearer comment could be made about the Chinese time window within which the genre flourished. Once other avenues opened to more effectively pursue the same goals and once the key player—the court—lost its capacity to frame the discussion, the political novel lost its purpose. Through its short bloom, however, it had a long-lasting effect on the standing of the modern novel in China. I will address this aspect in my conclusion.