

WORLD LITERATURE AND NATIONAL LITERATURE(S)

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There is as yet no consensus as to where world literature stands in relation to national literatures. Certainly, there was a world prior to nations, and literature had been written well before the rise of the nation-state and its subsequent dominance as an interpretive paradigm. The world will, hopefully, still be there after nations have perished, merged through agglomeration, or become obsolete as socio-political entities. That world literature predates and may well postdate the era of nationalism and national literatures constitutes part of its promised breadth. One tantalizing prospect is surely how it will succeed where national conceits failed. At the same time, nation-bound thinking is not alone in having to confront its own conceptual and historical limitations. Whether the present new scale of literary studies can reach its purported audiences, be they distant cultures, minor literary traditions, or parallel world histories, depends on what the "world" means. The sum of its parts, as a spatial setting, a global genre, a new connectivity, an open process of discovery, or the latest contender in canon making, world literature refracts a variety of desires for the agenda of future literary studies. In view of these different possibilities, the relationship between world literature and national literatures can neither be mutually exclusive nor easily reconciled. Just as a notion of world literature, observes Claudio Guillén, would be meaningless without nations (Guillén 1993: 38), so national literatures have always been inseparable from the creation of world peripheries.

That the two implicate each other in this way, importantly, does not lead to a voluntary social contract or the absence of mutual exploitation. To understand how different scales of literary studies operate in symbiosis as well as in antagonism, one could begin by examining how the conception of world literature has changed. A growing recognition is the need to clarify rather than to idealize any invocation of the world. The relatively recent criterion for such clarification, posited by de Riquer and Valverde as "*a toda creación literaria capaz de interesar a un lector de nuestra cultura y de nuestro tiempo, por encima de barreras nacionales o lingüísticas y de posiciones ideológicas*" (de Riquer and Valverde 1970-1979: 1: 3; all literary creation capable of being of interest to a reader of our culture and of our times beyond national and linguistic impediments and ideological positions), has produced unimpressive results. The

doom of any sweeping representation of borderless humanity may come as no surprise. A central condition for the conception of universal history in the eighteenth century, a project not so distinct from the Enlightenment reprise of the Republic of Letters (see Buescu in this volume), was the intensification of suppression elsewhere in the world (Buck-Morss 2009). Behind every project of universalism, in other words, lies a veiled history of offshore experiments and failed materializations. This historical example may serve as a useful caveat. The underside of the recent race toward ever larger scales of literary studies hints at another trend, to outsource from the rest of the world. From the transnational to the world (Moretti 2000a, Damrosch 2003, Casanova 2004), the hemispheric to the planetary (Etiemble 1966, Spivak 2005), the planned coverage anticipates an explosive, diverse ecology that perhaps only an early, by now obscure, proponent of world literature and evolutionism, Richard Green Moulton, could have endorsed without irony (Moulton 1911; see Lawall in this volume).

The justification for this shift toward greater inclusiveness, paradoxically, also seems to reject this very principle in practice. One lament is the increasing volume of literatures to be read. Though this fact is unlikely to be unique to the contemporary era, only recently has it stirred an anxiety so deep as to prompt critics to declare the exhaustion of the literary undertaking as it had been known. The idea of patiently poring over the thousands of obscure works that exist alongside every known masterpiece is largely banished as an outdated approach. Scoffed at as a fetish of the past, national literature has been pronounced dead upon arrival, presumably even for those for whom national sovereignty remains a distant goal.

With the shrinking of the global literary space, few critics can still plead ignorance of the existence of distant works. Yet the growing awareness of other literatures "out there" spells a new liability as well. Just as the routes of access begin to widen and multiply, something else comes to light. Even if one had open access to all the literatures of the world, no one, it turns out, has the time to read anymore. Franco Moretti's candid acknowledgment of the "other 99.5 percent" of the unread joins a chorus of others before him (Moretti 2000b: 207; see Thomsen in this volume). Without reducing the problem to a question of numerical disadvantage, however, other critics have been more concerned with the reified standard of linguistic access to reading itself. While the observance of a "Greenwich meridian" may be vital to the coordination of literary trafficking (Casanova 2004: 87–103), a just embodiment of that standard remains open to the future. The need for a paradigm shift, on this view, is not due to too much homework. Rather, that a deeply humanist discipline bases itself on a selected notion of humanity has been recognized as a crippling constraint.

In response to the asymmetry, René Etiemble suggested in 1963 that Chinese should serve as the international working language for comparative literary studies (Etiemble 1966: 27–30; see Sayeh in this volume). The statement was, admittedly, more rhetorically than pragmatically motivated. But it carried an instructive message. Only a language as different and distant as Chinese can offer a firm corrective to the overwhelmingly Indo-European base of a troubled discipline. The exoticized flavor of his proposal notwithstanding, Etiemble did draw attention to an important, basic question: in whose language should a supranational approach to literary studies

sample its specimens and receive its cues of worldliness? Before the implications could be fully drawn out, however, Etiemble's proposal caused noticeable discomfort. For one thing, it set the bar even higher for the average comparatist, whose required command of three or more languages and their respective literary traditions meant, in many instances, really one language with theory or two in practice.

Harry Levin was among the first to react warily to Etiemble's proposal. In his presidential address to the American Comparative Literature Association in 1968 he saw learning Chinese as the tip of the iceberg, with Korean and other similarly formidable languages to follow. Indeed, the linguistic picture of a truly world-scale literature has since grown even more complex. If Levin were speaking today, other Asian examples would include Manchu, Vietnamese, Thai, and Mongolian, not to mention the various topolects and their variants that are generally assumed under the rubric of "Chinese." There is no shortage of non-dominant languages whose regional and local imprints remain to be fully reckoned with on a national level and world scale. The contentious divide no longer resides in the false dichotomy of cultural opposites ("ideographic" vs. "alphabetic" languages) but proliferates in the subnational, local, diasporic, ethnic, and intranational intersections of non-standard dialects, foreign tongues, and bilingual crossings (Gao 2007, Ha Jin 2008).

From the perspective of language alone, therefore, world literature has yet to fill an important vacuum. Other than the occasionally voiced concerns about the dominance of global English, or "Globish," in postcolonial and postnational linguistic studies (Kachru 1992, Bolton 2002, Tam and Weiss 2004), few critics have tackled its yet-to-be-defined role in world literature. The preoccupation with translation and theories of translation in the past thirty years has all but precluded discussions about the material and institutional dimensions of the language in which one comes to read, write, and receive that first literary impression (Venuti 1998, Sommer 2004, Bermann and Wood 2005). It takes the more distant opinion of the late nineteenth-century American linguist William Dwight Whitney to remind us that literature, after all, has everything to do with the foundational, and unquestioned, attachment to linguistic nativity: "No one can claim to have ready access to the foundations of knowledge nowadays who has it only by the channel of his native speech ... Our native language is too much of a matter of unreflective habit with us for us to be able to set it in the full light of an objective study. Something of the same difficulty is felt in relation also to our native literature" (Whitney 1872: 399). Others echoed similar concerns. Five years after Whitney, Hugo Meltzl de Lomnitz, the founder of the first journal in comparative literature, made leveling the field of linguistic exchange a primary, albeit ideal, condition (see Damrosch in this volume). On this principle, "a Hungarian contribution to Camões scholarship would be written in Portuguese and a German contribution to Cervantes criticism would appear in Spanish" (Meltzl 1877). Had this trajectory been diligently followed, one would hardly need to make special occasions out of rescuing minorities to see a Malaysian analysis of Peranakan literature that is written in Baba Malay, or a Chinese study of Min opera conducted in Taiwanese. Meltzl's original vision of an even, reciprocal practice of multilingual comparative literature has all but dissipated from the current scene. Even while displacing both the geographical boundedness and the linguistic standard of national

literatures, for the time being world literature still relies on English as the main global vehicle for its institutionalization and dissemination.

Another similarly neglected thread in the current discussions brings into relief the presentist temptations of world literature. Anthologizers tend to choose their selections in relation to their own genre and sense of geopolitical space, dismissing previous attempts as incomplete or prejudiced. Most of the selections contained in earlier anthologies of world literature, for instance, are unlikely to be seen on the short lists of the current plans for anthologization. John Albert Macy's *The Story of the World's Literature* (1925), one of the most influential books on world literature in early twentieth-century Asia, which was translated into Chinese and Japanese no less than eight times, these days is labeled "a tasteless and ignorant hack book in the Van Loon tradition" (Jessop and Wheatley 1999: 265). John Drinkwater's *The Outline of Literature* (1923–24), another forgotten title in the context of western literary criticism, once served as the blueprint for the first critical anthology of world literature in China, compiled by Zheng Zhenduo between 1924 and 1927 (Zheng 1924–27), followed by the efforts of Zhao Jingshen (Zhao 1930, 1931, 1932), and again in an even more ambitious scope by Zheng in 1935–36 (Zheng 1935–36). The parallel phenomenon of writing world literary histories, a massive project of national legitimation that was undertaken in not only the United States but also Japan and China from the 1910s to the 1930s, underpins the shift in tastes and institutional standards. Shortcomings and ethnic prejudices aside, these books are part of the global genealogy of world literature, even if Macy's heavy biblical tone, or Drinkwater's sweeping treatment of "The Sacred Books of the East" (Drinkwater 1923–24: 139–62) makes the currently enlightened critic wish otherwise. The new revitalization of world literature undoubtedly has its own ambitions to fulfill. An important aspiration, however, is to go beyond merely collecting the authors and works that are already familiar in the disparate national canons that it now brings under one umbrella. It is the outliers that would most benefit from a new global forum. Seen in this way, an equally expansive historicization of the geopolitical origins of its gesture of hospitality would greatly strengthen the invitation to participate in world literature.

Indeed, world literature can be a serious enterprise and even a perilous venture. The revitalization project of world literature comes to the fore, not coincidentally, when an expressed desire for joint humanity appears all the more urgent because of its fading possibility. The notion of *Weltliteratur* had its close antecedent in the eighteenth century. The original purpose of the "Republic of letters," Abbé Prevost described in his *Journal étranger* in 1754, was "to bring together in a single confederation all the particular republics in which the Republic of Letters has hitherto been divided" (Van Tieghem 1930: v). By the time Goethe looked again to this promise in 1827 and made his famous proclamation for *Weltliteratur*, he was searching for the possibility of a greater cultural alliance in response to the wake of the Napoleonic Wars (see Pizer in this volume). Even though Goethe's vision is usually credited with an upbeat cosmopolitanism, his own understanding of the world literary community was surprisingly sober. His oft-quoted sentiment – "the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach" – does not capture his darker insight that its members would not see eye to eye. The

conditions for consensus were, in fact, minimal: "if [nations] do not care to love one another, at least they will learn to tolerate one another," with the expected result that "they will find in each other something likeable and something repulsive, something to be imitated and something to be rejected ... " (Schulz and Rhein 1973: 10).

Having to grit one's teeth through *Weltliteratur* in this way hardly conveys a sense of pleasure. Yet the tension between mutual need and repulsion appears to have always been the driving force. Up close, the internal dynamics of any self-styled Republic of Letters serve to maintain a system of checks and balances rather than to nurture particular intimacies among kindred spirits. Oliver Goldsmith, writing *The Citizen of the World* in the 1760s from the fictional perspective of a Chinese philosopher traveling in Europe, had no illusions about the pretensions of civility when coupled with rivalry:

... Every member of this fancied republic is desirous of governing, and none willing to obey; each looks upon his fellow as a rival, not an assistant in the same pursuit. They calumniate, they injure, they despise, they ridicule each other: if one man writes a book that pleases, others shall write books to shew that he might have given still greater pleasure, or should not have pleased. If one happens to hit upon something new, there are numbers ready to assure the public that all this was no novelty to them or the learned; that Cardanus or Brunus, or some other authority too dull to be generally read, had anticipated the discovery. Thus, instead of uniting like the members of a commonwealth, they are divided into almost as many factions as there are men; and their jarring constitution, instead of being styled a republic of letters, should be entitled an anarchy of literature.

(Goldsmith 1891, 1: 75-76)

Goldsmith understood that civility was at best a compromise among, not a transcendence of, self-interested minds. There are as many factions as there are worlds, and any attempt to bring them together under an artificial rubric reproduces their mutual hostility.

With the claim of world literature arrive new liabilities, as the idea of the world continues to outdo itself, folding prior moments of transnationalism and globalization into its reconfiguration. Already looking to the next transformation, Gayatri Spivak set out to "propose the planet in order to overwrite the globe" (2005: 72). This all-encompassing projection reminds one that the prescription propagates a new code of conduct, a form of literary governance that is based on the distinguishing mark of hospitality and sustainability rather than traditional forces of coercion (Tsu 2010). In the most desirable scenario, world literature proffers a supranational clearinghouse, where influences, interculturations, translations, intertextual dialogues, and chance relations between distant genres are given a place to meet on more friendly, or depoliticized, terms. If the place-based metaphor rings too nationalist a tone, at least world literature tries to avoid any old territorialist connotations by promoting new networks of fresh comparisons. If the idea of a well-intentioned matchmaker presumes too much moral capital and supra-agency, it bears

remembering that world literature suggests not a geospatial container or a singular historical actor, but an analytical descriptor of tendencies, correspondences, and texts in motion across time and space that continues to extend our understanding of the global literary geography.

Many seem to admit that even the most generous perspective of an Earth literature is not beyond dispute. New world visions do not generally mark the beginning of something but bear witness to the contradictory tendencies and tensions already underway, for which some particular vision of the world offers an attempted resolution. The "world" is thus summoned to transcend a presentist moment and, more specifically, to do a certain deed. To place one's hopes in world literature, or other similarly large-scale rubrics, as a way out of a periodic disciplinary crisis in comparative literary studies, for instance, provides a small demonstration of this utility. What, however, has world literature done for the rest of the world?

To make explicit the favorable and unfavorable conditions of membership in the world republic of letters, it is worthwhile to revisit the first moment of its offering in a specific transnational context. When Goethe discussed the idea of world literature in a conversation with Johann Peter Eckermann in January 1827, he acknowledged that such a global prestige should not be ceded to the Chinese novel, Serbian poetry, or any number of other traditions with a "foreign," or historical, interest but no real universal relevance. Anything less than Greek, in his view, was not a viable candidate to represent the "beauty of mankind" (Goethe 1901: 175). The particular Chinese novel he referred to was *Hao qiu zhuan* (*The Fortunate Union*), a seventeenth-century romance novel. Translated, in whole or in part, a total of twenty-six times in Europe, the novel, paradoxically, did not impress its foreign readers all that much. Even Goethe knew that it was not one of the best in its genre. Chinese writer and intellectual Zong Baihua, reflecting a century later in China on Goethe's fascination, was doubly perplexed that such a "second and even third-rate novel" could have piqued the German maestro's interest (Zong 1968: 189).

The novel's accidental entry into the global circuit explains how this came about. *Hao qiu zhuan* was first partially translated into English around 1719, when it came into the hands of James Wilkinson, a British merchant who worked for the East India Company. Wilkinson had spent time in Canton (present-day Guangdong) and the translation was the result of an assignment from his Chinese-language lessons with a Jesuit Portuguese priest. Wilkinson likely had access to a 1683 edition of the novel. He died in 1736, but his nephew lent his incomplete translation (a quarter of it still in Portuguese) to another interested party, Thomas Percy, who undertook a secondary translation of the translation. Percy made further, partial inroads into the Portuguese section. He performed the excellent service of carefully annotating the translation, providing extended footnotes on the Chinese customs and practices mentioned in the text, based on what he had gleaned from missionary accounts and European travel writings. The complete translation was published in 1761 under the long title of *Hao Kiou Chooan or The Pleasing History, a Translation from the Chinese Language, to Which Are Added, i. The Argument of History of a Chinese Play, ii. A Collection of Chinese Proverbs, and, iii. Fragments of Chinese Poetry*. It was then translated into French (1766), German (1766), and Dutch (1767) in quick succession.

Speculations as to why this particular novel was chosen are best settled with reference to Percy's preface. The abundance of marginal comments and corrections in the manuscript, he observed, confirmed that it was "the work of a learner." Many parts were "first written with a black-lead pencil, and afterwards more correctly overwritten with ink," clearly under the direction of a master or tutor well acquainted with the Chinese language. Percy concluded that "the following is a piece of considerable note among the Chinese, otherwise a stranger would not have been tempted to translate it. That book would naturally be put first into the hands of a foreigner, which is in highest repute among the natives." He was wrong. *Hao qiu zhuan*, though well known to Chinese readers, was neither very significant nor innovative. It was, however, relatively short and written in an easy style. A romantic plot with a splash of strong, but not difficult, moral message (Percy likens it to Samuel Richardson's novels) made it an ideal textbook for beginning Chinese. In any case, Percy emphasizes the lesser importance of its literary quality: "[The Editor] neither attempts to conceal nor extenuate its faults. He gives it not as a piece to be admired for the beauties of its composition, but as a curious specimen of Chinese literature, and leaves it to the critics to decide its merit" (Percy and Wilkinson 1761: xiv-xv).

Percy's point is revealing. The novel's supposedly high reputation in its native context merited its translation, even though it is still considered to be a lesser literary text. The Chinese novel, in other words, is more Chinese than it is a novel. Goethe's distinction between great literature and literature of historical interest expresses a similar bias. To take this as a reason to indict *Weltliteratur*, however, would miss a greater point about the interrelation between national and world literatures. If Goethe's distinction between literary value and ethnography exposes a double standard, this propensity is nonetheless inherent to any desire for the world from a national and culturally centrist perspective. To illustrate this important modality, I examine the first invocation of world literature from the other direction, in China, as a point of comparison.

When the notion of "world literature" (*shijie de wenxue*) was first discussed in China as early as 1898, it was inspired by a new platform for displaying global cultural prestige. Chen Jitong, a Chinese diplomatic official and writer who was widely recognized as a Mandarin insider in Paris and elsewhere in Europe, raised the subject with the notable late Qing (1895-1911) novelist Zeng Pu in Shanghai. In this conversation, Zeng recalls, Chen passionately advocated world literature as a new cultural leverage for those who could gain access to it:

We live in a time where we must rigorously pursue scientific studies in order to compete for survival. Where literature is concerned, we also cannot afford to be arrogant in holding ourselves to be uniquely superior ... we must now concentrate our efforts on, first, not limiting ourselves to one nation's literature and thereby remaining in blissful ignorance, but pushing for and participating in a literature of the world (*shijie de wenxue*). Since we want to participate in a world literature, our first step must be to do away with the barriers so as to preempt misunderstandings. To do this, we must advocate for translation on a grand scale. Not only should we bring others'

masterworks into our language, but our own works of merit must also be translated en masse into theirs. To avoid misunderstanding, we have to fundamentally change the literary customs that have been passed down. We must not only demolish the existing prejudices but also transform our methods in pursuit of a common goal. ...

(Hu 2003: 807–9)

Chen's expressed sentiment is hardly objectionable. A pursuit of world literature ideally moves boldly beyond provincial national conceits by offering a forum for exploring new commonalities and dispelling mutual distrust. The pragmatism of getting to know someone else's literature or conveying one's own in whichever host language has the greatest circulation takes precedence over any proprietary attachment to the nativist ideal of a national language. Chen's main reference point, admittedly, was French. The world stage at the time, moreover, was not exactly conducive to egalitarianism in practice. The late nineteenth century was a theater of imperialism and an incipient nationalist consciousness spurred by the reluctant awareness of the former coming to an end. Chen's proposal of world literature, therefore, was limited to a presumed exchange between already dominant languages and their capacity to engage on equal terms. Chen was, moreover, motivated by a felt indignation, rather than humility, over the lack of proper recognition of Chinese literature by western readers. Europe, from the vantage point of those in its colonial shadows, had been at the center of the world's reconfiguration. An entry into its literary platform was key to forging a more even nexus of cultural exchange. Even though asymmetry was palpable in every other way between the West and China, Chen's initial desire for world literature was born of a nostalgic, if genuine, wish to regain the cultural grandeur befitting erstwhile empires.

This early reception of world literature in the spirit of imperial cosmopolitanism quickly changed. At the time of Chen's conversation with Zeng, China was on the eve of one of its many cataclysmic revolutions in the modern period. Its relation to the world faced radical restructuring. The nineteenth century had already witnessed a series of events that crippled the Middle Kingdom, from the Opium Wars to the subsequent foreign occupations and internal ethnic uprisings. Losing to Japan in the watershed event of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 was an added humiliation, foreboding a new regional order in East Asia with Japan on the rise, and Japan's strength was again demonstrated in its widely broadcast victory over Russia in 1905. The attempt by China, falling ever further behind, to gain an international footing suffered a severe setback when the Treaty of Versailles ceded Shandong, a former German colony, to Japan instead of returning it to Chinese sovereignty. The peace terms of World War I brought anger and disillusion, and served as a catalyst for the already widespread anti-imperialist sentiment that pushed the then young Republic onto a path of urgent national salvation. The May Fourth Movement of 1919, inaugurated by a student demonstration and soon to be the platform for modernization, anti-imperialism, national survival, and New Literature alike, marks a self-proclaimed rebirth in every domain.

Such a violent (re)birth of a nation was hardly exceptional at the time. As the Chinese intellectuals and writers looked anxiously about them, they found no dearth

of company, mainly among those who had been at the peripheries of colonial empires or struggling to cross the threshold to independence. This new-found empathy for distant parallels opened up a channel to the world. A globalizing narrative began to unfold, built on subaltern resistances and pending extinctions, rather than on joint humanist ventures and utopian communities. Belated reports on black slavery in America, news of the Philippines' struggle for independence, the British colonization of India, Native Americans' pending racial extinction, the Boer Wars, and Russian anarchism steadily trickled in through the relayed voices of Harriet Beecher Stowe (Lin 1901), Fukumoto Nichinan (1902), and Kemuyama Sentarō (1902; Eber 1980, Ng 1988, Gamsa 2008).

Support for a different kind of world platform took shape and it was no less compelling. A formally expressed literary concern with the experiences of perishing nations and ethnicities appeared in February 1909. It took the form of a collection of translated foreign fiction devoted to the struggles of oppressed races and nations. Put together by the father of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun, and his brother, Zhou Zuoren, *A Collection of Fiction from Abroad* (*Yuwai xiaoshuo ji*) was intended to be merely the inaugurating anthology of a whole series devoted to introducing Chinese readers to recent foreign literatures. Within four months, the Zhou brothers finished and published the first two collections. Much to their disappointment, however, only forty-one copies were sold in Shanghai and Tokyo combined.

Commercial failure aside, this lone effort was to have massive reverberations throughout the rest of the twentieth century. It helped to shift the literary focus of cultural hegemony to the interstices of emergent, minor, oppressed, injured, and sub-global narratives. In this way, a new conceptual grammar for world literature gained ground, differentiating the national and world literary space along lines of conflict rather than focusing on a common literary humanity. If Goethe had imagined *Weltliteratur* to emerge from a world community with little in common, Lu Xun responded with a borderless literature of oppression without global triumph. In this way, at cross purposes but with just enough to disagree on, worlds are created within the world, and literatures rise from the possibility of literature.

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