

Translation, Cross-cultural Interpretation, and World Literatures

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Special Issue ***New Work about World Literatures.***
Ed. Graciela Boruszko and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/>>

Abstract: In their article "Translation, Cross-cultural interpretation, and World Literatures" Qingben Li and Jinghua Guo discuss how to make what is national literature become part of world literatures and posit that there are at least two ways by this can be done: translation and cross-cultural interpretation. Translation covers not only the conversion of language, but also the selection and variation of culture. In the context of modern Chinese literature, cross-cultural interpretation often emerges in the form of applying Western theories to explain Chinese texts in order to facilitate appreciation by Western audiences and to support the need of the internationalization of Chinese literature. Cross-cultural variation is not unidirectional, but multidirectional and thus cultural intersections take place across space and time thus facilitating the canonization of various literatures in world literature.

Qingben LI and Jinghua GUO

Translation, Cross-cultural Interpretation, and World Literatures

Since the 1990s, the concept of world literature has become a much debated topic — mostly in US-American scholarship and/or published in English — and this is perhaps related to an integration of disciplines and fields taking place within the humanities (see, e.g., Damrosch; D'haen; D'haen, Damrosch, Kadir; D'haen, Domínguez, Thomsen; Kadir; Lawall; Pizer; Sturm-Trigonakis; Thomsen; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Mukherjee). In Chinese scholarship, the idea of world literature is also relevant whereby emphasis falls on making Chinese literature more visible within other cultures and the internationalization of Chinese literature is related to the issue of turning a national literature part of world literatures.

All literature is intrinsically national: this is not only because literary works are written first in a given national language and therefore nationality of this language determines the nationality of its literature, but also because a language conveys ideas, values, emotions, and many other aspects which are determined culturally. However, not all literary works written in a national language become part of a national literary canon and some works are eliminated, while others come to form part of the canon and are regarded as classic models of the particular national literature. Some works which are popular and a classic model in a certain period may no longer be so in another period. Thus the creation, selection, and circulation of national literature is related to the historical context in which the production, reception, distribution, and (re)reading of texts constitute a complex process whereby it operate by means of multidimensional selection mechanisms involving individuals, communities, nations, and transnational entities (see Li and Guo). If Chinese literature wants to be read abroad and in other cultural surroundings, it needs to be understood and recognized in different contexts, while still remaining the representation of its own intrinsic value and valuation. This means that it must "travel" to other national literatures by means of translation including not only by the conversion of language, but also by cultural variations so that "the principles of selection never being un-correlatable with the home co-systems of the target literature" (Even-Zohar 241).

Personal choice is often associated with individual interests. For example, in 1947 Ditch diplomat serving in the U.S. Robert Hans van Gulik translated the Chinese novel *狄公案* (*Judge Dee*) in his spare time claiming to have translated it as a way to practice his English and because he found the story more interesting than texts he has read recently (see Barkman and Vries). Community choices are related to ideological tendencies and serve the purposes of a given community. For example, the translation of Chinese classics during the late Ming and early Qing periods carried out by the Jesuits had more to do with their missionary work as Matteo Ricci admitted when referring to his translations and said that it was done not for the purpose of bringing Chinese wisdom to the European scholars, but to "use it as the tool to convert Chinese to Christianity" (see Ma and Ren 34; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are ours). Further, national interests emerge at times when the entire national and transnational situation is at a turning point either because national communities experience some kind of cultural crisis or literary vacuum or because other national literatures contribute to the stimulation of literary developments. This may be the case today, but a similar situation occurred in the period known in China as the May 4 New Literature Movement when large numbers of foreign literary works were translated into Chinese in order to revitalize Chinese literature (see, e.g., Zheng). Revitalization is bound to influence in the following sense of processes:

the concept of world literature that consists chiefly of a canon, a body of works and their presence as models of literary quality in the minds of scholars and writers. But the phrase "world literature" is not used exclusively in so normative a sense. Another sense, increasingly prominent in recent years, makes "world literature" be an equivalent of global literary history, a history of relations and influences that far exceeds the national canons into which academic departments routinely squeeze and package literature. (It is not surprising that academic departments nationalize literature: departments are an invention of the nineteenth-century university, a supranational medieval institution re-chartered by the monoglot nations of the industrial era.) An obvious improvement on the anachronism and petty chauvinism of national canons, this global literary history remains under-valued so long as it leaves untouched by analysis the rival accounts of global history that occupy economists, historians and geographers. (Saussy 291)

Thus world literature needs to happen — as it were — along the following lines: "Setting up a comparative transcultural history of literature that would present its own theoretical limitations and fallacies but would simultaneously offer an effective and understandable assessment of the topic at hand (literary influence, period styles, revolutionary trends, global currents and convergencies, etc.), and thereby would reconcile the dangerous and cautionary aspects of theory with the need to maintain a disciplinary endeavor (the writing of a literary history, no matter how it is defined, be it in national, comparative, or global terms) presents a task that is both daunting and fraught with pitfalls" (Sucur 95). Along the various types of choices — personal, communal, national — which motivate translation, interpretation, and dissemination there are two seemingly opposite situations: in the first the translator selects texts similar to his/her own culture and which are easy for readers at home to understand and in the second the translator selects texts which are different from his/her own native culture, but which he/she sees as pivotal for the cultural development of his/her own nation. In the former situation it is relatively easy for readers to understand and accept texts. In the latter greater obstacles and resistance might be encountered. However, in each case the text needs to go through the filtering of the national culture.

Different from the selection mechanisms within national literatures, the selection processes in world literature and translated literature occurs across cultural and language barriers: "The foreign text is not so much communicated as inscribed with domestic intelligibilities and interests. The inscription begins with the very choice of a text for translation, always a very selective, densely motivated choice, and continues in the development of discursive strategies to translate it, always a choice of certain domestic discourses over others" (Venuti 468). This means that texts in translation always lose something with regard to source texts, but they also gain something, mainly the right to go beyond the boundaries of their own nationalities and to be read and understood in other national contexts. This also means that a national literature does not enter the literary territory of other nations instantly. As long as it is translated, there will certainly be problems regarding re-writing, variation, and misreading, and all forms of cultural variation: world literature is an "an elliptical refraction of national literatures ... that gains in translation ... not a set canon of texts but a model of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time" (Damrosch, *What Is* 281). The so-called "elliptical refraction" is different from simple reflection: if a person stands in front of an even mirror, then the image in the mirror is a simple reflection of this person's image, but if this person stands in front of an uneven mirror, the image will be deformed into an elliptical refraction. National literature and world literature enable such elliptical refractions rather than simple reflection and since world literature is related to both source and target literature, this refraction is "double" in nature. An elliptical shape is formed in the overlapping dual zone of the source culture and the receiving culture: world literature is produced in this middle ground associated with both cultures and not limited to any one part alone.

We posit that it is not enough to talk about cultural variation in terms of world literature. It is not only necessary to stress specificity and distinctiveness, but also commonality, generality, and cultural convergence. It is not only necessary to talk about unidirectional variation, but also bidirectional and multidirectional variation. World literature refers to national literature that can transcend the specificity of the nation-state's cultural boundaries and ascend to the common where it can be read and understood by the readers of other cultures representing both, unity between specificity and commonality, and variation and convergence: "A national literature poses all the questions. It must signal the self-assertion of new peoples, in what one calls their rootedness, and which is today their struggle. That is its sacralizing function, epic or tragic. It must express — and if it does not (and only if it does not) it remains regionalist, that is moribund and folkloric — the relationship of one culture to another in the Diverse, its contribution to totalization. Such is its analytical and political function which does not operate without calling into question its own existence" (Glissant 252).

In Western scholarship the models of "influence/reception" or "center/periphery" are often used to explain the processes involved in world literature: "If Western Literatures no longer need to solemnly formalize their presence to the world, a futile procedure after these serious charges against Western history, one by which these literatures would be qualified as a kind of mediocre

nationalism, they have on the other hand to reflect on their new relationship with the world, by which they would signal no longer their preeminent place in the Same, but their shared task in the Diverse" (Glissant 252). If we can signal distinctiveness and specificity in Western culture often regarded as the center of the world and point to commonality and identity in non-Western cultures paired with distinctiveness and specificity, then it is possible for us to build a new framework for the study of world literatures. Superficially, it frequently seems that a dominant culture generates greater influence upon weaker cultures. In hindsight, however, this "center/margin" mode actually has a big loophole (on this, see, e.g., Juvan <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/10>>). To a large extent, the model overlooks the multidimensional nature of the process of cultural transmission which affects all forms of knowledge, but even more so knowledge communicated by means of literature: a language subject to ambiguity and that yields various forms of interpretation in terms of personal, communal, and national differences. When influence enters literature and culture, this is mutual in many cases and thus cultural journeys are variations are thus at least two-way variations.

Lydia H. Liu re-examines the power relations between East and West with regard to European texts translated into non-European languages. She points out that translation should be understood as a brief expression of adaptation, diversion, and other trans-lingual practice: "the terms traditional theorists of translation use to designate the language involved in translation, such as 'source' and 'target/receptor,' are not only inappropriate but misleading ... the idea of source language often relies on concepts of authenticity, origin, influence, and so on, and has the disadvantage of re-introducing the age-old problematic of translatability/untranslatability into the discussion. On the other hand, the notion of target language implies a teleological goal, a distance to be crossed in order to reach the plenitude of meaning; it thus misrepresents the ways in which the trope of equivalence is conceived in the host language, relegating its agency to second importance" (27). Further, Liu proposes to represent the relationship between translated text (target language) and original text (source language) by means of "host language" and "guest language" in order to emphasize that a non-European host language can be modified by the guest language in the process of translation, form a collusion relation with it, or encroach, replace, and even seize the authority of the guest language. This is a new idea in translation studies that emerges from the perspective of cross-cultural research and deconstruction — the terms "host" and "guest" make reference to J. Hillis Miller who introduced a similar form of multidimensional dynamics for critical interpretation. The shortcomings of traditional translation theories pointed out by Liu also apply to the study of cross-cultural influences where she advocates the re-allocation of Sino-Western power dynamics.

For example, when speaking of world literature, Western scholars generally make reference to Goethe's concept and that when Goethe put forward the concept of *Weltliteratur* he was inspired by reading the romance 玉嬌梨 in its French translation *Iu-kiao-li ou Les Deux cousines* published in 1826 (see, e.g., Birus <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1090>>; Eckermann). This indicates that in Goethe's opinion Chinese literature had universal value and is part of world literature as he conceived it. Therefore, it is reasonable to regard the concept of world literature as undergoing a cyclic journey between East and West: "World Literature itself is a concept of journey, but it is not from the west to the east, and its genes are from the east originally, and it gradually develops into the theoretical concept in the west and then travels back to the east, or the whole world" (Wang 14). Li studied this circularity in the case of the play 赵氏孤儿 (*The Orphan of Zhao*) from ancient Chinese culture to Western culture and back to the modern Chinese culture in works by 纪君祥 (Junxiang Ji) (exact details of his life are unclear), a dramatist in the Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368), Voltaire, and 林兆华 (Zhaohua Lin) (1936-) and he points out that "such a round journey is no longer a two-dimensional and linear relationship between A and B, but it is a three-dimensional round structure and it is the three dimensional mode of cross cultural studies" (90) and that thus world literature is a powerful proof for the cross-cultural journey or the three-dimensional mode of cross-cultural studies (see also Li and Guo).

In "Toward a Productive Interdisciplinary Relationship between Comparative Literature and World Literature" John Pizer points out that

Damrosch's 2003 *What Is World Literature?* is unique among scholarly works in its effort to actually "follow the international circulation" of works across time and space as mediated by politics, commerce, competing efforts at translation, and archaeology. Damrosch believes a text becomes a work of world literature if it continues to remain vibrantly engaged in cultures beyond its sphere of origin. He feels that although translations inevitably distort the original meanings of such texts, world literature is actually improved by translation when it internationalizes the works' mode of circulation and challenges different cultures across time to transnational, transethnic hermeneutic dialogue. In Damrosch's view, controversies concerning the editing and translating of such texts actually enhance their status as world literature, because such controversies continue to stimulate critical interest in them. (11)

As Pizer sees it, the value of Damrosch's contribution to the study of world literature lies in the fact that he places the discipline within an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural studies paradigm (this is the same conceptualization as in Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek's framework of "comparative cultural studies" developed since the 1990s, see, e.g., "From Comparative" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1041>>; see also Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári). Pizer also indicates the close ties between world literature and cross-cultural interpretation, although he himself does not demonstrate much on this issue.

Generally speaking, "third world" countries would encounter the following three difficulties in promoting their nations' literature: 1) a language not belonging to any of the major world languages in itself becomes an obstacle for acceptance, 2) the fact that the culture of a given country might not receive worldwide attention because of its relatively weak political and economic position, and 3) works equipped with national particularities and unique cultural details may generate difficulties in cultural comprehension by foreign readers. With a growing impact on global political and economic affairs, China is no longer a "third world" country, but an "emerging market": not only the general economy and manufacture, but also cultural industries are on the rise and Chinese cultural policies are including translation in incorporating these studies in universities curricula (see, e.g., Wang and Liu). However, greater efforts in cross-cultural communication are necessary in order to increase the visibility of Chinese culture(s) (the country is vast and variations occur also at a national level) in the rest of the world thus increased translation in all languages — not only to and from English — is necessary.

While the phenomenon of cross-cultural interpretation has long existed, we trace briefly of the concept's and its practice's evolution in China. One of the earliest examples of cross-cultural perceptions and models are found in Qian Sima's (135-86 BC) *史記* (*Records of the Grand Historian of China*) where Sima made a detailed recount of China's culture, history, politics, and military affairs, etc., from the time of the Yellow Emperor around 2600 BC until his own time. In modern China, a good example is Wang's work "Comments on *A Dream of Red Mansions*" in which we find cross-cultural interpretation similar to what Yinke Chen pointed out in 1934, namely that "foreign concepts and internal resources complement each other" (2). With respect to modern Chinese literary criticism using Western theories only presents a misguided approach (see, e.g., Chen, Peng-hsiang; see also Huang and Cao) and we believe that such an approach proves limited in the study of the complex relationship between Western theories and Chinese texts and theories because it is one-directional West to East without including Chinese thought. A better approach is seen in Guowei Wang's work where while he did not translate Schopenhauer's original work he analyzed, selected, and transformed Schopenhauer's philosophical theory within a Chinese framework and another and rare example is Aimen Cheng's and Lixin Yang's 2003 collected volume *Comparative Literature in the Cross-cultural Context* in which work is presented with extensive use of not only Western thought, but also with Chinese thought.

Wang began with Laozi's words, but he revised them to "The reason why there are troubles, pain, suffering and sorrow is that we were born human, with a given body" (1). These well-known words are from chapter 12 of Laozi's text where the original text reads "All my sufferings result from my body. If I don't have this body, how can I have any problems? (10). We might say that the quotations cited by Wang are wrong or at least that he did not use them directly and re-wrote them instead. Cross-cultural interpretation demands that we should learn more about the reasons why Wang did not use the original text. Was this because of a memory problem or was it something else? Given Wang's rigorous scholarship, such errors were rare. In "王国维与世界文学" ("Guowei Wang and World Literature") Jiang noted that "Wang did not regard *A Dream of Red*

Mansions as only a Chinese novel, but also a novel exploring the problems of life faced by all mankind. It was a 'great writing of the universe.' He analyzed and commented this novel from the perspective of World Literature, and regarded as 'the tragedy of tragedy'" (104).

Wang respected Goethe's work and wrote a biography about him as one of "the world" greatest literary figures" ("Biographies" 372). If Goethe is the first one to propose the concept of the world literature, then the first one to offer this concept in China is probably Jitong Chen (1851-1907), a diplomat in the late Qing Dynasty and more recently there appeared several texts about Goethe and world literature (see, e.g., Li <<http://www.gmw.cn/01ds/2002-08/21/10-85613B962304200548256C1C000BC307.htm>>; Pan). Following Pu Zeng (1872-1935), a novelist in the late Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China, Chen claimed that "We should encourage the following things: firstly, we should not be satisfied with our own national literature. Instead, we should go and get involved in World Literature. To be involved in the World Literature means the first strategy should be to eliminate misunderstanding and misreading. In order to do this, a large-scale translation of works should be promoted. We should not only translate well-known foreign literatures. Our most influential works should also be translated and introduced to the word. To eliminate misreading, we should change the traditional custom on literature, and abandon preconceived ideas as well as the original model to pursuit consistency. However, the key to realize the above two objectives is to read more foreign literatures" (Chen qtd. in Hu 349).

The above statement of Chen is in the letter from Shi Hu (1881-1962) to Pu dated 21 February 1928 in which Hu discusses the issue of translation. Pu replied Hu on 16 March 1928, mentioning referring to Chen, but he did not indicate when Chen made his statement although we know that is occurred likely between 1898 and 1902. Following the above reference to Chen about misunderstanding and misreading, the strategy for eliminating misunderstanding relies on translation. For example, attention to poetic styles or ancient prose and classical poetry in Chinese literature should be paired with studies on drama and narrative as it is done in Western scholarship. We read Chen's suggestion as a transfer of Western scholarship to China with the parallel transfer of Chinese scholarship to Western scholarship, that is, the translation of texts of world literature cannot be a one-way journey of translation where Chinese literature is translated to increase its visibility or Western literature is read to increase Chinese knowledge of the West. As pointed out above, the processes of knowledge exchange are more complex and involve change and adaptations and not merely reproductions in another language.

In the case of Wang, he appears to be introducing Western studies to the East, but at a deeper level and it can be seen that he adopts Western theories for cross-cultural re-interpretation of Chinese works, a process that, in turn, would contribute to facilitate the understanding of Chinese concepts in the West (relevant is here also the recent development in Chinese scholarship whereby attention is paid to analyze literature based on the vast corpus of Chinese thought instead of relying singularly on Western scholarship, see, e.g., Chang and Yang). Perhaps because of this, Jiang wrote that Wang "stepped into the center of the world" (102). In other words, in Wang's world view there exists no distinction between Chinese literature and Western literature and he even reckons that "anyone posing such statement is not possessing real knowledge ... As far as I know, Chinese and Western literature will flourish or both decline. Since the atmosphere prevails, the two kinds of literature can promote each other. Besides, since we live in the current world and talk about modern literature, there is no way that Chinese literature can flourish without Western literature or that Western literature can flourish without Chinese literature" ("Prelude" 367; see also Wang, "Two-way")

In conclusion, in order to integrate Chinese literature in world literature, the processes of translation and cross-cultural interpretation are required. Further, it is important to point out that the need to research Chinese scholarly and critical resources to interpret world literature within a multidimensional paradigm remains extant. For centuries, China has been a rich culture with a wealth of philosophical and critical knowledge that needs to be further explored, re-interpreted, and transmitted. To spread Chinese texts as being interpreted by means of Western theories is only one side of the cross-cultural journey of texts' circulation.

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