


Introduction to Western Canons in a Changing East Asia

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**Introduction to *Western Canons in a Changing East Asia***

**Simon C. ESTOK**

In the wake of the East Asian financial crisis, huge economic and cultural changes in East Asia have resulted in what may without exaggeration be called a paradigm shift in departments of literature at top universities in Seoul, Beijing, Taipei, Shanghai, and Tokyo. The motivation behind the Call for Papers for *Western Canons in a Changing East Asia*, a Special Issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>, was to look at this developing shift with the specific intent of figuring out some of the broad implications for the study of literatures written in English. The assumption both with the Call for Papers and throughout the process of collecting and editing the submissions has been that the changes within the region, combined with an economic slowing down and belt-tightening in the West, have resulted both in a radical decline of the importance of Western literary canons within East Asia and in a more sincere appreciation of domestic work. One of the dangers of a collection such as this one, however, is in essentializing notions both of the West and of Asia. As Jon Solomon and Han-yu Huang explain in a 2014 call for papers for a topic in the journal *Concentric* entitled "Except Asia: Agamben's Work in Transcultural Perspective" "the term 'Asia,' like that of 'the West,' names neither an essential civilization nor a substantial geographical entity but rather something like what Agamben identifies as an apparatus: a network of heterogeneous elements spanning several registers" (<<http://www.forex.ntu.edu.tw/faq/news.php?Sn=2403>>). In some sense, Korea, Taiwan, Mainland China, and Japan are among those constituent "heterogeneous elements" (each with their own subgroups) in the network I define loosely as "Asia" in this Special Issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*.

Some of the most challenging questions facing scholars in departments of English in East Asia have been about the enduring legacy of British colonial domination, even though Britain did not colonize Korea, China, or Taiwan in the ways it did Hong Kong, India, and Australia, to name a few. Rather, it has been through a valorizing of both English as a language and the West in general as a cultural and economic superpower that the colonial effects have most impacted the region—at least in terms of literary studies. This is not to say that there is an absence of such departments as Korean literature,

Chinese literature, Japanese literature, and Taiwanese literature; rather, what we often see are English literary texts serving distinct utilitarian goals in terms of nationalism, industrial and economic growth, and international legitimacy.

Within the postcolonial Korean context (i.e., the post-1945 years following liberation from Japanese imperial rule), English was an integral part of the liberationist mindset and English literary studies served a clear and present purpose. Indeed, as Hyesook Son argues in "Canon Formation and the Reception of Blake's and Dickinson's Poetry in Korea," "at one time, Korean scholars identified literary studies in English as a method of academic modernization and an entrance into a universal language and discursive field stemming from enlightened Western countries. However, the history of canonization reveals various social, political, and cultural pressures of Korea, and the canon itself has become a record of the changes, conflicts, and transformations Korea has undergone over the years" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/2>>). In a similar vein, in "Reading English Literature and Korean Scholars' Search for Authentic Subjectivity" Jonggab Kim discusses the ambivalence of Korean scholars toward English literature, which has come at once to represent both a perceived threat to Korean national identity and a route to internationalization. Kim examines the growing confidence of Korean scholars on the one hand and their insecurity and sense of anxiety over asserting their subjectivity within Korea's postcolonial context on the other. For Kim, fully understanding this divided mind means utilizing the Korean notion of *juchesung* (which Kim defines as "independent or authentic subjectivity") and how this has propelled both Korean scholarship and Korean national identity. Kim's analysis relies as deeply on Western phenomenology as on Korean subject theory. As such, his article enacts the very dismantling of the uni-directionality that is increasingly and excitingly coming to characterize the changing Western canon in East Asia in general. Central to Kim's argument is the idea that "if it is necessary to historicize a phenomenon of split subjectivity caused by the trauma of colonization, then it is also necessary to universalize such a split subjectivity produced by history, rather than to relativize it" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/3>>). Yet, we do well to remember that not all traumas are created equally and that even within the context of those "heterogenous elements" of which Solomon and Huang speak in their warning about essentializing the idea of "Asia," there is interesting heterogeneity.

In his article "Environmental Literature and the Change of Its Canon in Korea" Won-Chung Kim investigates the development and characteristics of environmental discourse in Korea and how ecological writings of the West were introduced and received in Korea. As I have pointed out elsewhere ("Discourses of Nation"), the bulk of the work done within Korea on ecocritical matters has been with Western authors—mostly US-American, with a smattering of work on British, German, Canadian, South African, and other nationalities. Discussions about domestic authors and landscapes have been limited. The bulk of the scholarship has dealt with men (Thoreau and Gary Snyder taking the top spots). At the same time, Korean ecological writing and scholarship do not seem to have attracted the interest of many mainstream US-American ecocritics—not in ratios proportional to the influence of the U.S. in Korea. Kim suggests that this might be changing and that Korean scholars are seeing an irrelevance of US-American ecological ideas to Korea's complex political and social environment. Kim tries to show how the Korean poet Chiha Kim and his life philosophy, along with the rediscovery of Kyubo Lee's ecopoems, are signals of a general shift; yet, even if this were the case, the step is larger than Kim seems to imagine from domestic recognition of local talent to actual influence on the global stage. Nevertheless, Kim's general thesis is valid: "Partly owing to the postcolonial push of Korean academia in the twenty-first century and partly owing to Korean recognition of the importance of its own ecological literature and ideas, the canon for environmental studies in Korea has undergone a remarkable change from the almost wholesale importation of Western works and thoughts to a more vigorous investigation and inclusion of Korean literature and ideas" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/4>>).

Korea is not alone in its revisioning of the hows and whys of English studies and we see a similar shift in Taiwan. As Peter I-Min Huang explains in his article "Canon Formation in the Study of the Environment in China and Taiwan" in this Special Issue, the impact of colonialism (even when indirect) must be addressed if we are to envision a viably situated future for English Studies. Huang argues that "the impact of material environments on English Studies and the influence of local, mainland Chinese and Taiwanese, ecocriticism on English Studies, could not be addressed without making some com-

ment at the outset both on the long history of western-European colonialist and imperialist projects that were embarked upon beginning in the fifteenth century and stamped English language and literature teaching, as well as on the shorter but no less dark history of neocolonialist enterprises that were fortified by and buoyed up English language and literature teaching after World War II"

(<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/5>>). Huang is interested specifically in how ecocriticism taught under English studies on Mainland China and in Taiwan is being shaped locally by scholars who publish both in Mandarin and English and address environmental issues specific to Mainland China and Taiwan. He focuses on the work of Shuyuan Lu (魯樞元), an eminent ecocritic and a specialist of Chinese Literature. Huang maintains that Lu's 2012 *陶淵明的幽靈* (The Specter of Tao Yuanming) is the single most important ecocritical study of Chinese pastoral and is part of a growing body of literature that is registering the impact of the environmental humanities on English studies. This, Huang shows, is in turn, influencing English studies taught in China and Taiwan. One of the interesting effects of Huang's work is to expose the geographical situatedness of canonical genres such as the pastoral. Huang shows that the pastoral in Chinese means something different than the pastoral in English. Although the "pastoral is China's most distinguished literary genre" the compulsion for industrialization and development under the Chinese government's rather stern vision means that there is "an enormous amount of embarrassment is attached to [the notion of pastoralism]. After the second half of the twentieth-century, when China industrialized and urbanized, pastoral became a 'dirty,' suspect word. Its poets, including Tao, were forgotten or outcast as elitist, reactionary, and worse"

(<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/5>>).

The matter of ecocriticism is an important one in *Western Canons in a Changing East Asia* (see also Estok and Sivaramakrishnan <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/>>). As Hannes Bergthaller points out in "The Canon of East Asian Ecocriticism and the Duplicity of Culture," "many ecocritics in East Asia bristle at the fact that their field continues to be dominated by scholarship from the US, and they resent this dominance as yet another expression of US-American political and cultural hegemony ... the development of varieties of ecocriticism more attuned to the cultural and ecological specificities of the region and center on a non-Western literary canon is simply a matter of self-respect, part and parcel of the larger task of intellectual decolonization"

(<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/6>>). Indeed, if this bristling and resentment is present in much of English literary studies in the region, then it is more intensely focused, acute, and visible within the field of ecocriticism. Yet, there are no easy solutions to this matter. Although, as Bergthaller explains, "over the past decade or so has the field begun to systematically question the Eurocentric assumptions that have informed both environmentalist discourse and much of ecocritical scholarship, and to engage, however reluctantly, with postcolonial theory and theories of globalization," the solutions cannot be surface responses: "the emergence of ecocriticism in East Asia ... poses problems which cannot be resolved by turning ecocriticism and postcolonial studies into a joint-venture, or by supplementing the ecocritical vocabulary with the language of environmental justice" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/6>>). Indeed, as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin pointed out 25 years ago in *The Empire Writes Back*, "the subversion of a canon is not simply a matter of replacing one set of texts with another" (189) and part of the whole process of removing the colonial mantle involves a "reconstruction of the so-called canonical texts through alternative reading practices" (189). Within Western literature, it is difficult to imagine a more canonical figure than Shakespeare, and, with the exception of the Bible, no set of texts have had a greater global impact. For good reason, then, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin go on to list some of the many re-visions of Shakespeare and how these attempts to dis-mantle colonialism have worked.

In her article "The Canon and Shakespeare's Plays on the Contemporary East Asian Stage" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/7>> I-Chun speaks directly to the reconstruction-through-alternative reading practices of which Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin theorize. In her analysis of Shakespeare's Roman plays as they are re-worked by East Asian directors, Wang argues that the popularity of and interest in Roman antiquity is a telling social comment. The imperialist and expansionist themes and motifs of Roman antiquity as expressed in Shakespeare and re-worked in Taiwan offer innovative visions for a twenty-first century audience familiar with the recent experience of Japanese colonialism and exploitation. More than this, as Wang shows, local playwrights and directors not

only re-examine the themes of imperialism and expansionism with their experimental strategies of stagecraft, but also probe into their own cultural or local identities through Roman matters. Wang shows that by positioning themselves in dialogue with Shakespeare across time and space, East Asian appropriations reflect, among other things, such contemporary matters as the current yearnings for political rights in Hong Kong that are being played out on the city streets. In a sense, what we have is less a revitalizing of a Western canon than the birthing of a situationally-nuanced hybrid and multi-vocal drama that answers local needs rather than announcing foreign ethics and mores. Even more poignant is the fact that much of this work is not in English. Another important implication of Wang's careful study is the fact that Western canonical materials have not always come directly from the West. Korea is a good case in point, where the tools of one colonializer (Britain) were used by another (Japan). It was, after all, the Japanese who brought Shakespeare to Korea between 1910 and 1945, when Japan "annexed" Korea (see Lee <<http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/blog/2010/02/20/korea/>>). Among the other things imported to the countries that Japan colonized (along with rape, torture, murder, enslavement, human experimentation, and other war crimes) were changes in what was considered legitimate forms of education. While people such as education scholar Gwang-Jo Kim believe that "the zeal for education [in Korea] was reinforced by the recent past, in which Japanese colonialism and the Korean War convinced Koreans to invest more in people than in physical capital" (30), it would be historically inaccurate and dishonest to suggest that Japan brought any sense of global legitimacy or authority to the Korean educational system. On the contrary, the years of Japanese occupation hurt Korea's rapidly changing educational arrangements. Shortly before 1910, "the government [of Korea] and an increasing number of elites accepted Westernization—broadly defined—as a way of overcoming Confucian 'backwardness,' and implemented reform measures on various fronts—education, the economy, religion, health care, dress, etc." and this was a "campaign aimed at introducing the Western educational system to replace the Confucian system" (Chang 2-3). These reforms all stopped in 1910 and "the Japanese tried to exterminate Korean culture by banning the use of the Korean language in school, teaching only Japanese history, and forcing students to take a daily oath to the Empire of Japan, and to adopt Japanese names" (Andrew, Howe, Kane, Mattison <<http://www.learningace.com/doc/692544/496b5d2716bb3440917e3e82df6c9755/south-korea2007>>).

Disavowing the domestic and valorizing the foreign has often been both a part of colonizing processes and of acquiescence to these processes. Korea continues to struggle with questions about legitimacy. As I argue in my article "Re-defining South Korean Scholarship and Education within the Context of Globalization," "the flagship journal of literary studies in Korea—*The Journal of English Language and Literature*—does ... poorly when it comes to citing domestic authorities, averaging about six percent. This over-valuing of the foreign and under-valuing of the domestic, in part an effect of a self-effacing social etiquette, is a radical indictment of the powerful impact of Western scholarship" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2214>>). In many ways, what the articles in this Special Issue respond to is the matter of educational and scholarly legitimacy. With U.S. universities still garnering the top marks in world rankings, East Asian universities struggle to keep up and (more ambitiously) to be contenders within the global ring and the "complex matters of conflicting impulses toward national and global identities" have resulted in some confusion between "the encouragement of scholarship that will have international impact" on the one hand and, on the other, an obsession with "using AHCI or SSCI indexed journals as the standard by which to produce globally-relevant scholarship" (Estok, "Re-defining" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2214>>; see also Tötösy de Zepetnek and Jia <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2426>>). The same comment applies to China and Taiwan, both of which take SCI, AHCI, and JCR listings as proof-purchase of arrival within the global ring. It is important to consider, however, to what degree such an approach effaces the local and trumpets the US-American. Nae-hui Kang argues similarly that "an obsession with internationalism in the form of international exchange and conformity to the 'global standards' of SCI, A&HCI, and JCR for research activity is making South Korean knowledge production increasingly subordinate to the 'international,' i.e., American model" (219). Again, such is also true for China and Taiwan.

The power of US-American culture and capital is reflected in many East Asian university curricula. Virtually all of the 340 or so universities and colleges in South Korea, for instance, have courses on US-American literature, but none specifically devoted to Canadian literature or Canadian studies (although five currently have programs about Canadian policy and politics) or Australian or New Zealand



studies. A similar dynamic exists with Taiwan's 322 universities, where US-American and British literature courses flourish while no courses in Canadian literature currently exist (although there is an Association for Canadian Studies in Taiwan). Of Japan's 760+ universities, five have courses devoted to Canadian literature. Here, too, courses in US-American literature are everywhere. China's 2442+ universities stress "American" and ignore Canadian or Australian literature.

Prime Minister of Canada Pierre Elliott Trudeau once likened living beside the United States to "sleeping with an elephant" and said tongue-in-cheek that "no matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt" (Trudeau qtd. in Thompson and Randall 250). As a route to empowerment and growth, a focus on US-American culture has characterized much of the academic scene in China, Korea, Taiwan, and, to a lesser extent, Japan. At some point, however, it must become necessary to address the costs of what seems a too easy accommodation of US-American interests. In the context of these changes, Gregory E. Rutledge asks "What is the Afro-Orient?" in his article "Race, Slavery, and the Re-evaluation of the T'ang Canon" and argues that "the changing global politics in East Asia, and DNA evidence that the Chinese—like everyone else—descend from East Africa, present a hope for new canons that do not marginalize texts" of African Americans such as Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, whose work explores social and racial issues and the essential oneness of humanity" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/8>>). Rutledge re-evaluates—from the purview of African Diaspora literary studies—historiography that considers the place of East African slave lore in T'ang Dynasty fiction. Julie Wilensky's 2002 "The Magical Kunlun and 'Devil Slaves': Chinese Perceptions of Dark-skinned People and Africa before 1500"—a revision of Hsing-lang Chang's 1930 "The Importation of Negro Slaves to China Under the T'ang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907)"—is pivotal since it occupies the nexus between European-American, East-Asian, and African Diasporic canons and policies. Rutledge situates Wilensky's and Chang's works in the context of Edward W. Said's *Orientalism*, an essential heuristic for understanding Western subjugation of the "Orient." However, in light of Wilensky's and Chang's non-engagement with the vast body of Western research on slavery, Rutledge argues that an older Afro-Orientalist frame is needed to establish an heuristic sensitive to the ancient East African culture and exceptionalism immanent in the stories Wilensky and Chang treat. Rutledge draws together compelling issues and argues at one point that "President Obama's symbolic import and the rise of China as an East Asian economic goliath (recognized by Jeffrey A. Bader's *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy*) merge together ... since the nineteenth century Afro-Orientalism has been a nineteenth- and twentieth-century socio-cultural strategy and informal alliance deployed against Western imperialism" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/8>>).

The existence of an Orient well before the height of ancient Greece of which Rutledge speaks resonates in another contribution to this Special Issue, that of Rongnü Chen and Lingling Zhao, entitled "Translation and the Canon of Greek Tragedy in Chinese Literature" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/9>>). Chen and Zhao discuss when and how ancient Greek drama were introduced and merged into Chinese literature. Since Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* was first translated into Chinese and published in 1932 up to now, this Greek tragedy has been translated eight times in China (from 1932 to 2013). Starting from the Chinese translations and reception of *Prometheus Bound*, Chen and Zhao analyze why so many translators have chosen to translate it over the past eighty years and how they have done so. In the process, Chen and Zhao also give a detailed description of how these translating activities joined in construction of Chinese modern literature. Another study in *Western Canons in a Changing East Asia* in highlighting the importance of translation is Chu Shen who in "Canon Formation and Children's Literature during the May Fourth Movement" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/10>>) analyses the features of what she designates as "New Culture nationalism" in May Fourth China. Translation of children's literature is used for illustration as a typical site in which nationalism is mirrored and is in turn constructed. Shen argues that it is believed that analysis of translations helps explicate the nature and character of New Culture nationalism and that the tensions inherent in cultivating children through translated literature reveal the dilemma faced by modern Chinese intellectuals in envisioning new national subjects for a changing China. Shen claims that New Culture nationalism is one of the best sites for contemplating the subtleties and complexities of nationalism in early twentieth-century China, and that it needs to be juxtaposed with cosmopolitanism, with which it stands in a mutually implicating relationship.

A genre specific study is Biwu Shang's "Reception and Variation of Classical Narratology in China" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/11>> in which he maps the reception, application, and variation of classical narratology in a changing Chinese critical context in the past three decades and Shang discusses the dynamic interplay between Western narratology and its Chinese counterpart. Shang draws a sketch of the travelling and acceptance of classical narratology in China from three perspectives—namely introductions, translations, and practices—and classifies them into three waves in a chronological order: the first, second, and third waves of classical narratology in China (in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s respectively). Shang discusses these three waves and maps the variations that they produce. One of the key points Shang argues is that while "it is undeniable that the introduction of Western narratology has transformed and will continue to transform the fields of narrative studies in China" and while "more introductions and translations of Western Narratology are still much needed [in China]," there should also "be more introductions of Chinese narrative tradition and narrative theory to the West" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/11>>. This idea of a bilateral flow of information is among the key concerns of this Special Issue. While the flow of cultural capital from West to East has often been one-way and while such a one-way flow has often resulted in what Arthur Angell Phillips called "cultural cringe" (which in the twentieth century was largely from East to West), the position of Western literature in East Asian post-secondary curricula is undergoing radical and rapid changes. In what almost amounts to a summary of the changing Western canon in China, in "Western Canons in China 1978-2014" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/12>> Lin He surveys anthologies of foreign literature, book series, and textbooks used in literary departments and learned journals and draws a map of the situation of Western canons in China. He concludes that Western canons have been determined by a complicated market mechanism, ideological preconceptions, and literary institutions at universities. He posits that in the age of globalization, an intimate and subtle relationship has been established between Western literary canons and the Chinese readership and that consumerism, new media, changing notions canonicity, and so on show that canonization is always an unfinished project. Of interest about the change of the canon of Western scholarship in China is Miaomiao Wang's "Canonization and Ba Jin's (李堯棠) Work in Chinese and US-American Scholarship" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/15>> because her study suggests that there is no sufficient interaction between the two traditions and practices of scholarship. Thus in the case of Ba, who is one of the most prominent writers of China, Wang queries whether the Western canon of literary scholarship has had an impact on Chinese scholarship.

*Western Canons in a Changing East Asia* includes a "Review Article about Chinese Comparative Humanities Journals Published in 2013" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/13>> by Yuan Liu in which he reviews the following journals: 外国文学评论 / *Foreign Literature Review* (Chinese Academy of Social Science), 外国文学研究 / *Foreign Literature Studies* (Central China Normal University), 外国文学 / *Foreign Literature* (Beijing Foreign Studies University), 国外文学 / *Foreign Literatures* (Peking University), 中国比较文学 / *Comparative Literature in China* (Shanghai International Studies University), 当代外国文学 / *Contemporary Foreign Literature* (Nanjing University). The review article is meant to invigorate attention to scholarship published in contemporary China. Further, *Western Canons in a Changing East Asia* contains a "Bibliography for the Study of Literature, East Asia, and Globalization" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss6/14>> compiled by Zhaomei Zheng.

With global realignments of power and capital come national reassessments of education and curricula. In what ways are topics such as Shakespeare or Blake or Indigenous studies taking shape differently within East Asia under pressures of radically changing power alignments in the world? What are the impacts of new media on the new cultural emphases that are developing? In what ways are these re-focusings a part of imperial collapses and what are some of the specific implications for philosophy and literature in postcolonial Asias? This timely special issue includes the work of authors from South Korea, Taiwan, the U.S., and China who write in response to and analysis of these and other questions.

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