


The End of the Nobel Era and the Reconstruction of the World Republic of Letters

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Guohua Zhu and Yonghua Tang,
"The End of the Nobel Era and the Reconstruction of the World Republic of Letters"
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Abstract: In their article "The End of the Nobel Era and the Reconstruction of the World Republic of Letters" Guohua Zhu and Yonghua Tang critically examine mechanisms of cultural hegemony associated with the Nobel Prize in Literature from a neocolonial lens. Borrowing from Casanova's idea of the "World Republic of Letters" and its attentiveness to geopolitics, the essay proceeds to reconstruct the dialectical relations between the nation and the world. It does so, in the first place, by documenting and analyzing the process of negotiation and bargaining entailed in the construction of global cultural hegemony and thereby examine the functions and boundaries of hegemony. Further, it reveals how colonial apparatuses of understanding continue to limit the ways in which we imagine the world and sustain the power relations that ought to be questioned, challenged, and broken. Ultimately, the essay aims to provide a multi-dimensional and multi-layered vision of the World Republic of Letters that is genuinely multi-polar.

Guohua ZHU and Yonghua TANG

The End of the Nobel Era and the Reconstruction of the World Republic of Letters

Every October since 1901, literature circles, cultural agencies, journalism, and social media all over the world hold their breath as they wait for news of the Nobel Prize in Literature. The 2017 Noble Prize in Literature was awarded to Japanese British writer Kazuo Ishiguro, sending the Japanese author Haruki Murakami (a perennial favorite of gambling companies) to yet another disappointment. Suddenly, media reports overflow; storage of books by Ishiguro sold out; literary commentaries from academia mushroomed; Ishiguro's "loyal fans" skyrocketed overnight. Compared to the Oscars, the carnival of Hollywood, the Nobel Prize ceremony foregoes the spectacle of having all nominees for awards, and indeed all representatives of the film industry, gather in one place. It makes writers out to be lone sages capable of changing the course of world literary history through solitary labor and who are inscribed in collective memory by sheer genius and devotion to most subtle literary expressions. It is for these very reasons endowed with utmost sacredness and can be regarded as the most solemn and hallowed ritual of the "World Republic of Letters."

This essay critically examines the Nobel Prize in Literature from the perspective of neocolonial critique. Neocolonialism, in scholarly discussions, seems to be more intimately linked to economic, political, and social arenas. By contrast, postcolonialism tends to be associated with the realm of culture rather than socioeconomic processes. But the differences between the two terms are more than a matter of focus. They have more to do with methods and perspectives of research. In this paper, we adopt a neocolonial framework out of two primary concerns. First, we believe neocolonial analysis offers a useful methodological standpoint for dissecting the operating logic of Nobel Prize. Indeed, we choose not to focus on the close interpretation of literary and textual meanings, without bypassing them all together of course. What we seek to uncover, instead, are the ways in which cultural hegemony manifests itself in the Nobel Prize in Literature. Specifically, we shed lights on the operating logic of hegemony bodied forth in such conceptual binary constructs as "center/periphery," "humanity/nation," and "aesthetics/politics." The second rationale for adopting a neocolonial stance is that we concur with most neocolonial critics in believing that we have not entirely entered the post-colonial era. In other words, the most urgent issues facing third world countries are neither how the West as the ex-colonizer views us, nor how the West views itself through the act of gazing at the Third World. The more crucial issue is how the West attempts to maintain its dominant position in the world through various political, economic, and cultural strategies. Without creating artificial boundaries between postcolonial and neocolonial critiques, we acknowledge the fact that new formations of colonialism are still in the works. What we need to do is not only uncover, but also resist.

French scholar Pascale Casanova's idea of the "World Republic of Letters," which we mentioned above, is particularly useful to our discussion. The original meaning of the "World Republic of Letters" refers to the community of European intellectuals from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment era. European literati formed a closely-knit network through writing and reading, which enabled them to transcend national boundaries and the control of religious and secular centers of authority. Casanova proceeds from this history to discuss the worldliness of literature, which also constitutes this essay's

entry point to a discussion of Nobel Prize in Literature. In selecting winners, the Noble Literature Prize committee places particular emphasis on works with transnational and cross-cultural appeal, reinforcing such old-fashioned philosophical and aesthetic theories as "universal human nature," and "common humanity," namely the idea that, despite our increasing investment in linguistic and cultural diversity, good literary works that reveal the core of humanity can still gain recognition worldwide; "aesthetic transcendence," namely, literature could provoke compassion via its supra-utilitarian aesthetic power, even between the peoples of two belligerent countries; and "organic integration" — the integration of form and substance in a literary work constituting an inherently stable system of meaning that will remain intact while circulating through different cultural contexts and different modes of reception and interpretation. Undergirding all these beliefs is a dualistic understanding of literature, which separates its secular dimensions from its transcendent dimensions. Although this dualism is still pervasive in everyday cultural commentaries, it is increasingly problematized in poststructuralist theories that argue against all forms of essentialism and fundamentalism. Casanova's "World Republic of Letters" is quite representative of criticisms of conventional beliefs about literature and offers us a way of examining the dualism of the Noble Prize in Literature.

To a large extent, Casanova's approach resembles Bourdieu's reflexive sociology in that she bases her argument on the relationship between "field" and habitus (Casanova, xii). According to her, the idea that "pure literature" could only achieve interior depth and be free from attachment to capital and nationalism is in itself a habitus formed in a certain social field (Casanova, 352). To overcome this habitus, Casanova offers a counter idea, one that is based on the dialectics between partiality and entirety. Every written book that claims to be literature is an integral part of the grand configuration of the world literary space. Only "the totality of...world literary space...alone is capable of giving meaning and coherence to the very form of individual texts" (Casanova 3). More importantly, this space consists not of "an abstract theoretical configuration, but an actual — albeit unseen — world" (Casanova 3), a totality consisting of endless conflicts:

In this broader perspective, then, literary frontiers come into view that are independent of political boundaries, dividing up a world that is secret and yet perceptible by all (especially its most dispossessed members); territories whose sole value and sole resource is literature, ordered by power relations that nonetheless govern the form of the texts that are written in and that circulate throughout these lands; a world that has its own capital, its own provinces and borders, in which languages become instruments of power. Each member of this republic struggles to achieve recognition as a writer. Specific laws have been passed freeing literature from arbitrary political and national powers, at least in the most independent regions. (Casanova 4)

Casanova shifts the conceptualization of "literature-world" (Casanova xii), one that exists above and beyond the political world, to world literature, one that breaks national and political boundaries. On the one hand, the secular world is comprised of not only existent nation-states but also literature. On the other, literature not only belongs to the insular intellectual territory but also is organized and constructed

as a republic following the rules of the secular world. The world republic of letters, thus, is neither an insular world nor an idealized heaven for literature. It's far from being anti-political or apolitical; rather, it is an overlapping yet free-standing secular/political world. The world of literature is similar to the world of capital: it ostensibly follows the boundaries of national state but keeps challenging them. The order of literature world, like the circulation of capital, is imbricated over the order of nation-state, the existence of which is undeniable, although not always tangible enough for us to see.

As Jonathan Culler has pointed out, Casanova's theoretical formation urges us to critically engage with literature's world system (i.e., a literary field bigger than what Bourdieu suggests). Literary works all over the world constitute a system through commentary, translation, award, and film adaptation. If we can understand how such a system works, we could do away with the version of world literature that trumpets sameness (Culler 246). As a critical structuralist, Culler believes that we can debunk "mythology" (in the sense of Roland Barthes) by revealing the operating mechanisms of the system. The Nobel Prize in Literature, is perhaps an organizing pillar of such "mythology." Casanova accurately points out one operating rule: the world of literature yearns for the prize. The more international a prize is, the more special and desirable. Nobel Prize in Literature, evidently, is the most international and special prize that represents and even defines literature. Writers all over the world deem the Nobel Prize as a global certificate, an undebatable arbitrator of literary excellence. The awarding institute, the Swedish Academy, exists as the jury for reviewing the most outstanding literary works. To some extent, it functions as the Supreme Court in literature that monopolizes literary tastes. Other famous literary prizes, including the Prix Goncourt in France, the Faulkner Award for Fiction in the United States, the Booker Prize in the United Kingdom, and the Akutagawa Prize in Japan, are known for regional characteristics. However, their international influence can never match that of the Nobel Prize. Interestingly, the internationalism of Nobel Prize in Literature originates from its far-reaching influence, rather than conscious strategizing. Despite their multilingual proficiency, the Nobel Committee members' judgment is not based on professional training in comparative literature or consideration of "political correctness" but their "traditional" literary mastery and cultivation. Such judgment, once given, could potentially establish a universal standard for literary excellence across nations and regions. The internationalism of Nobel Prize, to some extent, is better characterized as trans-national instead of inter-national. What lies here is a dialectical reinforcement between universality and the Nobel Prize. Nobel Prize's legitimacy is dependent on our belief on literature's transcendence over mundane everyday life, cultural tradition, and geopolitics and the existence of a universal benchmark for literary merit. In return, our faith in literature's preeminence and transcendence is reaffirmed by the moment when a writer, irrespective of his or her domestic fame, is awarded the Noble Prize in Literature by the "distant Swedish" Academy (Pei 355).

We argue that it is exactly the dialectical reinforcement described above that could easily fall into the trap of neocolonialism. First, suppose literature could surpass national borders and form an alternative "World Republic of Letters," the Swedish Academy, unsurprisingly, is the institution that effectively possesses the greatest symbolic power. Accordingly, the yearning and admiration for Nobel Prize pronounces and fortifies the central location of the West among world cultures. Second, the diverse

ways of pursuing literary achievement on the part of writers of different countries are made out to be uniform, symbolized by a single prize. Such extreme asymmetry engenders a sense of poverty for countries lacking certain cultural capital, which in turn leads to the consolidation of the neocolonial order. Most importantly, for extraordinary writers, winning a world-level literary prize is less about fame and material gains and more about the idealized expectations and promise that the prize embodies. The Nobel Prize in Literature, which has been awarded for more than one hundred times, allegorizes a great era and stands for the conviction that, ultimately, this world is made of very similar human beings. The split condition of the world could then be bridged, and a reunion could be achieved again through literary works that interrogate humanity. The excellence, sublimity, and impartiality that Nobel Prize stands for will provide the cornerstone for such a conviction. This faith has become part of the contemporary cultural unconscious that constitutes the hidden driving force in our pursuit of certain noble goals. At the same time, it could blind us to the fact that it is exactly the monopolizing imperative of Western hegemony that sabotages the possibility of Great Unity through literature.

Terms like "hegemony" are relevant to our discussion here. Casanova's "World Republic of Letters," furthermore, provides a suitable framework for us to situate questions of hegemony in world literary space. Based on the synthesis of the two theoretical formulations, we deem the Nobel Prize in Literature as a symptom or allegory of the "hegemony" of Western literature. The cultural hegemony is manifested in its unparalleled monopolistic power to define what is the most outstanding literary work. What's more, such monopolistic power is collectively acknowledged by the World Republic of Letters. Yet how should we understand the production and maintenance of hegemony? Evidently, the operation of hegemony here is not featured by antagonistic coercion. In Gramscian terms, this particular form of cultural hegemony functions as a serial process of complicated and concrete acts of negotiation, in which the ruling powers and residents of World Republic of Letters achieve the shared deference to the symbolic capital of the Nobel Prize. Based on the theories of literary sociologists like Casanova, in the meantime, we can say that the production and reproduction of hegemony are not necessarily a well-orchestrated and premeditated maneuver by a certain nation-state or interest party. Bourdieu's concept of "strategy" is useful here. Social actions, according to Bourdieu, follow strategies based on habitus. What constitutes "strategy" is "the active deployment of objectively oriented 'lines of action' that obey regularities and form coherent and socially intelligible patterns, even though they do not follow conscious rules or aim at the premeditated goals posited by a strategist" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 25). Likewise, the dominant position of the Nobel Prize in Literature, buttressed by massive cultural capital accumulated over a century, does not emerge from Swedish Academy's intentional calculation. However, what we can do is to depict and analyze the processes in which cultural negotiations happens and the history of the Nobel Prize as an institution, thereby probing the definition and boundary of the so-called "hegemony" and fathoming the ways in which monopoly is reproduced and reaffirmed. Further, we want to investigate the ways in which and the extent to which dichotomies such as West/Orient, center/periphery, civilization/savage still function as modes of intelligibility, shaping our imaginations about the world and maintaining the power relations that are supposed to be questioned, challenged, and broken.

In the case of the Nobel Prize in Literature, what is worth investigating is not how it makes an *unjust* decision based on its monopolistic status, but how hegemony is manifest when it endeavors to make a *just* decision. We usually have the impression that the Nobel Prize is immune from utilitarian calculations. Such an impression perhaps arises from the founder Alfred Nobel's legendary life and idealistic spirit, Swedish Academy's academic prestige and moral image (the tenured academicians are initially accorded by the Swedish king), and Nobel Prize's financial independence from any governmental or commercial agencies. The Nobel Prize has been given out to a pool of important and great twenty-century writers based on its recommendation system in literary and academic communities and its strict adherence to confidentiality code. Enough economic, political, and cultural capital has accrued to the Nobel Prize from its nearly uninterrupted operations over one hundred years. Because of this, it is free from the external influence from certain governmental agencies or civic organizations. Sweden, as a highly developed country of constitutional monarchy, is diplomatically independent and away from the contested region of international political conflict. The Nobel Prize's impartiality is more persuasive if it is issued by Sweden compared to the United States or the United Kingdom. Sweden is also different from France, which Casanova terms as the "Greenwich" in the World Republic of Letters. France has the richest cultural tradition that may turn into a liability. In other words, the impartiality of the literary prize could be compromised exactly because of France's centrality. The Swedish academy forms a competing yet complementary relation with the French literary world. Specifically, the Nobel Prize relies on the overall central position of the West; yet its consecutive agency is not located in the center of the West. Nobel Prize's geopolitical location is isomorphic to literature's dual present/absent relations with reality. The impartiality of Swedish Academician's specific decisions may be subject to question; yet the existence of the Nobel Prize in Literature is an exemplification of what impartial position can possibly be. In some way, the search for impartiality is itself the reproduction of Nobel Prize's symbolic capital, or even the reproduction of impartiality, on which Nobel Prize's monopolistic position is reliant.

How is the impartiality of the Nobel Prize in Literature produced? First, the symbolic value of the Nobel Prize in Literature benefits from the cultural capital of other Nobel Prizes. The achievements of scientists who win the Nobel Prize in Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine are almost universally recognized. The juxtaposition of the Nobel Prize in Literature with the other Prizes guarantees a sense of impartiality. Second, procedural justice is fully ensured in awarding the Nobel Prize. Because of this, for over more than one century, the Nobel Prize may be subject to controversy but seldom caused any scandals of impartiality. However, a literary prize cannot claim the absolute objectivity like prizes in natural sciences. The aesthetic criterion itself can be open but needs to be reconciled with the "idealism" in Nobel's will (Casanova 149). Because of the co-existence of multiple yardsticks, discussions of impartiality morph into the production of the gold standard for literary value, which is made possible by the Prize's rotation among different nations. The Nobel Prize in Literature demonstrates its impartiality and strengthens its leading position through achieving a temporary equilibrium among different value orientations. Casanova calls the equilibrium "neutrality," which denotes the dissociation of literary evaluations and researchers themselves from geopolitical events and concerns. The Swedish Academy has been quite adamant about the principle of neutrality, balking from appearing to make political

statements. However, the Nobel Committee needs a series of flexible actions and tactics to operationalize this principle in concrete literary reckonings. According to Casanova's observation, the neutrality principle is not always static; rather it has taken multiple forms historically. First, the Committee fully respects Nobel's yearnings for world peace and thus favors politically neutral countries that are less involved in wars. This is especially true in certain historical times. For example, the committee nominated the Swiss writer Carl Spitteler in 1914. In 1939, it even accepted candidates from Switzerland, Finland, and the Netherlands at the same time. The neutrality principle in literature is specified as "a supreme artistic value, the embodiment of reason and moderation [... and] a sort of aesthetic academicism privileging 'balance', 'harmony', and 'pure and noble ideas' in narrative art" (Casanova 149). It's hard to gauge the efficacy of such aesthetic rule. Yet the fact that Swedish Academy wasn't willing to award the first prize to Tolstoy because of his hostility towards Western civilization reveals that ideological concerns did play an important role. Since the 1920s, the Committee turned to another sense of "neutrality" in order to detach the Nobel Prize from the influence of political events like warfare. This time, the works that can receive nomination should not advocate cultural nationalism and have too strong national characteristics. In Casanova's opinion, Spanish writer Benito Pérez Galdós' nomination was accepted because his work is not-so-Spanish; German poet Arno Holz was challenged on the grounds that his work was "too German". In 1921, when Anatole France won the Nobel Prize, the Presentation Speech especially praises his anti-nationalism and anti-racism: "In the Dreyfus affair he stood in the front rank of those who defended justice against misguided chauvinism" (qtd. in Casanova 150). The ways in which and the extent to which a work is "too national" is indisputably subject to the discretion of the Nobel Committee.

Not long after, there emerged a third standard of neutrality – any work that bears the honor of Nobel Prize should be well-received by as many public audiences as possible. In other words, the winning work should be appreciable for people from other countries and regions, rather than the few scholars from the Swedish Academy. Paul Valéry failed to win the Prize exactly because his work is too profound and hardly approachable. Neutrality here seems to be universal. Casanova incisively debunks such universality by pointing out the role of the market and economy. In order to understand "the structure of the world field", we need to investigate the underlying economic forces, which is increasing along with the rising of the strong national cultural market (Casanova 149). In other words, only economy is truly neutral. It is therefore of uttermost importance to "indiscriminately" put literary works selected by the West into the burgeoning national cultural markets.

A fourth neutrality is intended to avoid parochialism and attachment to particular cultural values, especially Eurocentric literary ideals, and to open the Prize to more countries and regions outside the West. This is why the Nobel Prize in Literature began to give attention to the "periphery" of the world literary space, favoring awardees from various South American countries, India, Japan, and China. However, the fourth variant of neutrality is also hinged upon the hidden force of economics. The increasing geographic openness needs to be reconciled with the second rendering of neutrality that advocates for the independence of literature and against cultural nationalism. The winning of French Chinese writer Xingjian Gao is a typical case of such negotiation. As Casanova points out, the inner

message sent out is that the Nobel Prize is not for the works that reflects "a contemporary Chinese history and milieu," but honors "a genuinely autonomous body of work that, by integrating the norms of literary modernity, has been able to reconceive, in the Chinese language, the forms of an older Chinese literature" (Casanova 152). In other words, Gao did not move the Nobel Committee through his political dissidence but through his combination of Western literary modernity and Chinese literary forms. Yan Mo's award is based on similar reasons. The Nobel Prize might euphemistically disguise itself to sustain the image of neutrality. As critics from within China, we want to explicitly expose the three underlying strategies of cultural colonialism. The old colonialism simply ignores the "incompetent" China; the revised one awards the prize to diaspora Chinese writers; the most recent neocolonial solution is to pick a Chinese writer that fits the Western value ideals. Rather than a belated validation, the Nobel Prize is more of a sweetener and enticement.

Admittedly, there are alternative interpretations of the Nobel Prize other than the radical critique we mentioned above. Yet we can almost be certain that the "neutrality" principle is no more than compromise. The Swedish Academician may respond by asserting that they are simply upholding aesthetic standards. However, the lurking value orientations are divulged once so-called aesthetic standards face controversies. As a world-level award aiming to maintain its monopolistic position, the Nobel Prize faces the dilemma that it needs to maintain impartial self-reproduction and increase symbolic capital by displaying openness while indiscernibly respond to the new situations by emphasizing the purity of "aesthetics" and "artistry." Yet the aesthetic rhetoric sometimes falls short and the normative Western ideal will appear. Take the American singer Bob Dylan as an example, his winning is the first time that Noble Prize is awarded to non-reading literary form. The Swedish Academy explains this decision by arguing that literary mastery and artistry can transcend the hierarchical boundary between literary genres. However, this is an example of circular reasoning – We cannot be convinced that Bob Dylan is already a literature master and he intentionally break certain rules (or he was simply composing songs) until the Swedish Academy said so by awarding him the Nobel Prize. It is the Swedish academicians, rather than Bob Dylan himself, that came to the front stage and played the decisive role. Bob Dylan won simply because he wrote good songs. The ones that dared to break the boundaries separating different literary genres are the judges from the Swedish Academy, instead of Bob Dylan. From the surface, this decision allowed the Nobel committee to shake free of long-existing literary "traditions" and measure the significance of literary work by its value to humanity. However, such "anti-tradition" decision is in particular need of tradition's buttress because certain literary tradition serves as the very reference point to define and distinguish the notion of literary innovation and revolution from reckless rebellion. Therefore, in the award ceremony speech, what comes along with Bob Dylan is Greek singers, Publius Ovidius Naso, Romanticist poet (William Blake, Arthur Rimbaud, Walt Whitman) and William Shakespeare. When the Nobel committee praises that "Bob Dylan has changed our idea of what poetry can be and how it can work", the "our" here refers to an exclusively Western collective. This is not to say that there is no "poetry/song" (诗/歌) tradition in the East. On the contrary, this tradition persists until today, at least in China. What we are trying to reveal here is that the idea that Bob Dylan

changed our idea about poetry is only intelligible in a Western context ridden with clashes between elite culture and popular culture.

Because of similar reasons, when the Nobel Committee proclaimed that Xingjian Gao's writing reconfigures the traditional forms of Chinese literature, many domestic Chinese writers and literary researchers could not appreciate such a move. Gao's writings after he left China do not overshadow other Chinese writers in literary innovation. Admittedly, Gao was among the first to introduce modernist theories into China in the 1980s. However, Gao can hardly match Zengqi Wang's original contribution in reconfiguring contemporary Chinese literary and his long-lasting influence. Why Wang's work that is innovative can hardly be understood by the Swedish academicians, just as Chinese researchers often fail to fully appreciate Gao. As Casanova points out, when the Nobel Committee described Xiangjian Gao as entering into "literary modernity," the Committee members were referring to Western literary modernity. One might argue that the role of literary modernity in the Nobel Prize competition is not to merge non-Western literature into Western tracks, but to form an antagonistic relationship between literature and secular politics. In other words, no matter how substantively a writer engages in national politics, he or she needs to borrow the discursive practice of "aesthetic modernity" to rewrite political engagement (Zhu, 143). Nonetheless, such a discursive practice of aesthetic modernity, either abstracted as a general principle or materialized as concrete rhetorical tactics, is closely linked to modernism and the modernist zeitgeist, which was developed in the West and is being exported to other places. In other words, it is an "outsourced" Western culture, a "superior" Western literary discourse which takes root and flourishes in Third World countries distant from the West.

We have reasons to believe that the negligence of national literary tradition is not based on certain political stance but the structural defects of the Nobel Prize. Although the Nobel Committee makes comments in the award ceremony speech on the awardee's literary merit, these comments are ritualistic and used to justify the decision. The underlying reason is the fact that the Nobel Prize does not need to provide explanations for its own decision, boasting a cultural power bolstered by the practice of withholding nomination and voting details. The division of labor here is that the Nobel Committee provides decisions whereas literature critics in each country provide interpretations and explanations. The explanatory work here is not to furnish the decision with a moving literary ideal, but to form a cycle of interpretation that links a certain writer's work with national literatures in general. The Chinese literary world has been discussing which Chinese writer better deserves the Nobel Prize. This deliberation is an assessment of the Chinese literature tradition – the narrational and expressive characteristics of Chinese literary tradition; the most highly-accomplished and representative literary genre; the linguistic and substantive loss in translating Chinese literature; the contemporary transformation of the humanist spirit; and the ways in which Chinese contemporary literature can enter into and engage with the interior psyche of ordinary Chinese folks... These manifold discussions about China are invariably historically contingent. It is history that constitutes the Chinese literary tradition, which further defines "Chineseness." The Nobel Prize lacks intellectual interests towards such contingent specificities of Chinese literature. Politically, it is at least hostile towards China. Despite its upholding of Enlightenment tradition since the Eighteenth century, the Nobel Prize is not able to cast genuine attention to the

politically-engaging Chinese literary works because political relevance entails the interaction with specific social contexts and the critique towards the present situations. The scholars from the Swedish Academy remain uninformed about such realist critiques practiced by writers like Lianyan Ke and Zhenyun Liu. Yet their exotic imaginations about China are instigated by Yan Mo's magical realism, the strong reception it has received in the West is unsurprising since it restyles and reinvents Western literary resources. The spiritual path for contemporary Chinese literature is not to exemplify humanity outside the national framework, but to assert Chineseness in the first place. To achieve this goal, we must battle against various banalities, among which are the insufficiency of the very concepts of "Chineseness" and "humanity." The discussions regarding national character and universal humanity need refiguring and reconfiguration. The new imaginative framework will be politically charged where the boundaries between aesthetics and politics are destabilized and esthetic valence can be the condensate of new political experience.

For Third World literature, being grounded in its own tradition doesn't mean shortsightedness. The literary excellence that the Nobel Prize symbolizes could be a positive instigator that cautions us against a nation's or individual's blind cultural confidence. Not only is the lure of the Nobel Prize is monetary; so is the grand fame associated with moving from a "national writer" to a "world's great writer". However, the over-eager pursuit of the Nobel Prize could sabotage the ecology of national literatures the course of their development. We can now observe the destructive potential of such a sabotage. From a postcolonial lens, the Nobel Prize inevitably gives out various messages pushing writers to compose literary works that cater to Western's imaginings of the Third World. Such imaginings could take different forms, be it discriminatory, voyeuristic, or melancholic. From a neocolonial stance, various Western literary prizes, characterized by the Nobel Prize, will certainly exert influence on every stage of global literature production, circulation, and consumption, which perpetuates the dependency of Third World countries' "literature industry" on the West. Apart from these, a new pitfall is particularly noteworthy. Although Chinese populace's yearning for the Nobel Prize is not necessarily stronger than those of other countries, their eagerness is amplified by the faith that China rapid development naturally entails and necessitates winning the most prestigious international prize and thereby demonstrating its cultural soft power. A further set of questions might be: will there emerge a new international literary prize that suits Chinese literature and is capable of competing with the Nobel Prize? Is a new World Republic of Letters with a Chinese capital possible?

Such a passionate vision is misleading because it displays a "Cold War" version of the World Republic of Letters. The resistance against neocolonialism should not duplicate its own logic. Casanova, in the preface to the 2008 version of her book, provides two insights. First, the World Republic of Letters is still a country with its own center no matter how big it is, which replicates the mode of nation-state. It thus deals with the relationship between the center and the periphery, rather than the relationship between one World Republic of Letters and another one. Although Casanova's endeavor to break the nation-state framework could help us locate the neocolonial landscape, her critical research is still trapped in the neocolonial logic if we don't have a new image of the literature world to replace the unipolar mode of World Republic. It is in this sense that we neither seek to come up with an international

prize that is tailored to Chinese literature and contend with the Nobel Prize nor advocate a new World Republic of Letters with a Chinese city as the Capital. Instead, we advocate that the configuration of the future is certainly not unipolar, but a multi-center and multi-dimensional coordination. Likewise, literature does not inevitably possess a central position in multifarious cultural formations. It is not the most important means of structuring national ethos; nor is it the mandatory path that leads from nationalism to internationalism. It cannot be the key index that ignites international competition either. It is based on the abovementioned understanding that we come to the view that the Nobel era is coming to its coda. Yet the new situation is not a simple reversal of asymmetric relations under the extant hegemony; the true question we need to confront is how a genuinely multipolar World Republic of Letters would be possible.

We might as well envisage that there are at least four or five international literary awards in each continent that are comparable to the Nobel Prize in Literature. There are both competition and communication among them, which creates checks and balances rather than unilateral global cultural hegemony. Or perhaps we demand overly from the Swedish Academy by wishfully expecting it to pursue Chinese values over Western values. Admittedly, the West has a valuable humanist legacy and we don't need to over-correct. What we need to do is to create space for diverse literary awards instead of duplicating the Nobel Prize. Nor do we advocate a literary prize that competes with the Nobel Prize in forming a regional monopoly. Rather, these parallel prizes should confront the multi-lateral and multi-layer dialectics between center and periphery in today's world. For example, if a literary award is to be named "Asian Literary Prize," it must deal with two sets of conundrums. For one, it needs to articulate the ways in which it could represent Asia and tactfully balance the tremendous internal heterogeneity within Asia. For the other, we must be cautious against the prize becoming Western culture's Asian broker without falling for provinciality and parochiality. Such a standpoint is different from that of the Nobel Prize. The Nobel Prize in Literature passes its judgement from the height of common humanity. It navigates between the local and presentist political calculations and the universal and futurist aesthetic explorations. Yet such a standpoint, as we have revealed, is still Western-centric. It not only easily creates the separation between literary forms and substance but also blinds certain literary traditions. Naming a literary prize "Asian" is not to replace the national and the cosmopolitan, but to concretize the cosmopolitan and human experiences via the lens of Asia while simultaneously going beyond the limited purview of the nation-state. In our blueprint, what makes literature literary is its embeddedness in local experiences and attentiveness to people's joy, sorrow and resistance in certain temporal and spatial contexts. Equally important is extending literature's scope beyond the local and into the distant and the other. What is important is to locate a literarily productive communication path between the two missions and whereby magnify the concrete local experiences through literature. World literature, to borrow David Damrosch, is a third space created by literary encounters and communication. It is "an elliptical refraction of national literatures" (Damrosch 281), which is "generated from two foci at once" (Damrosch 133). According to Damrosch, such space enables "a genuinely reviving encounter [...] when we seek pleasure and enlightenment rather than a possessive mastery of the world's cultural productions" (Damrosch 303). Such a vision might be overly optimistic in that it

assumes a vacuum space free of power existing in literary contact. Yet it correctly points out that an international literary prize ought to devote itself to building a third place and engaging in on-the-ground literary conversations so that national literature can enter the field of world literature, rather than seeking universality at the "highest" level. Such a prize is not the supreme arbitrator; instead, it creates opportunities for reviving encounters among nations.

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